

inkling

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/27548518) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/27548518>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Video Blogging RPF
Relationship:	Clay Dream/GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF)
Character:	Clay Dream (Video Blogging RPF) , GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF) , Sapnap (Video Blogging RPF) , Drista , Other Video Blogger(s) , Karl Jacobs
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Soulmates , Writing on Skin , Fluff , Tooth-Rotting Fluff , Flirting , cuteness , Mutual Pining , Falling In Love , Blushing , Idiots in Love , Clay has no chill , George is lonely , Sapnap is doing his best , Soul Bond , Height Differences
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of inkling
Stats:	Published: 2020-11-13 Completed: 2021-01-29 Chapters: 12/12 Words: 98795

inkling

by [alltimecharlo](#)

Summary

Clay feels like he's been living his life leading up to this very day, his eighteenth birthday, waiting impatiently for black ink to scrawl across his skin.

George feels like he's been living half of his life, not having heard a word from his soulmate through their bond since his eighteenth birthday almost three years ago.

August 12th, their worlds finally collide.

[a dnf soulmate au where words written on the skin are shared between a soulmate pair]

Notes

hellooo

i'm back with a new fic, i know it took a little while but this idea has truly inspired me! i haven't seen many dnf soulmate fics out there and they make me so soft i just had to write one <3

hope you enjoy!!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

soul bond

Clay wakes to the jarring and familiar blaring tone of his alarm signalling that it's a school day.

Any other day, he would roll right back over in his spacious double bed, bury his head into his pillows and give himself five luxurious minutes more of silence. But not today.

Today is different.

Today is August 12th, Clay's birthday, and he's turning eighteen years old.

Today is the day he may finally meet his soulmate.

Leased with a new sudden strain of energy from his realisation and making sure to double and triple check with his phone, Clay practically leaps out of his warm sheets and into his en-suite bathroom, hastily pushing his dirty-blond fringe out of his face as it falls before his eyes.

He levels his gaze in the bathroom mirror and lets his eyes adjust to the harsher levels of light streaming in through the window, painting blocks of shining silver over the white tiles.

Clay grins at his reflection as his brain attempts to catch up, that *this* is the day. This is the day he might actually speak with the one he is meant for for the first time in his life; something he's been dreaming of since he was old enough to care... now he's finally old enough to experience it.

When both soulmates reach the age of eighteen, a deep and unbreakable bond is forged between them. A connection, of sorts, that no one has ever found the scientific answer to explaining, but one that forms the foundations of so many lives weaved together.

The soul bond.

If one soulmate brings pen to their skin, whatever is scrawled or drawn or meticulously noted is simultaneously printed on the other's skin in the very same place. The flesh forms a canvas of deep conversations and declarations, and the bond between the two grows stronger.

His parents are the perfect example of soulmate romance. A warm, loving and tightly-bound couple; Clay knows they could never see themselves with anyone else. They'd told him of their first meeting when he'd asked, intrigued and eager to learn about your supposed potential perfect other, who can still communicate with you with nothing but a mere pen to skin.

Clay recalls how they had spoken to him with fond and almost sickly-sweet remembrance at their first conversation through their bond. His dad had immediately used cheesy pick up lines to make his mum laugh, scrawling sweet declarations of love and affection across her skin on the daily, until she eventually became just as smitten.

He knows he's lucky to have such amazing role models of the amazing possible potential of a soul bond in this ever-changing and drastically modernising world where some people don't even bother to try and find their soulmate. He knows other people's experiences have been the complete opposite to his parents' too, ending in divorce, or worse, an unrequited bond.

But Clay can't bring himself to think like that.

Bottling up the excitement at the possibility of his own potential other half since the beginning of his teenage years, he's been waiting for this day for too long to allow any negative thoughts to drag

his excitable mood down. Not yet, at least.

He bites his lip, leaving a sharpish indent as he lets his eyes finally scan the expanse of his chest, both sides of his arms as he rotates them under the sunlight blaring through the window and finally the long stretch of his legs.

Clay feels his grin fall a little as he tries not to be too disappointed upon turning around and checking his back, only to find nothing, no words, printed across his tanned skin.

He brings his green eyes back up to meet his own in the mirror and tells himself it doesn't matter, that there's ample reasons why there's nothing scrawled across his skin on the morn of his eighteenth; his soulmate might be younger than him. But it doesn't stop the burn of disappointment that seems to still and lie static in his hammering chest.

That's okay. Clay thinks to no one other than himself. He's never been one shy to reaching out to another first, confident and self-assured in all he attempts to do.

Returning more slowly back into his room and chucking on a simple white t-shirt with his most comfiest and favourite pair of black jeans, Clay desperately racks his brains for something very clever, witty and hilariously funny to say to his soulmate in order to immediately land on their good side.

Despite having this day marked down on his calendar for years and years, however, Clay suddenly forgets all of the perfectly conversational and introductory things he had planned to first say to his soulmate a million times over in his head, and before he knows it he's grabbed the brand new pen he had placed on his bedside table last night for this very purpose and drawn a few simple dots with a curved line underneath.

A smiley face, because who doesn't love a smiley face?

Clay certainly no longer does as soon as the black pen leaves his skin and he feels a wave of nibbling regret for his hasty action. Surely he should have introduced himself first? Should have offered his soulmate a greeting at least?

Oh, God.

He groans into the palms of his hands and runs a hand roughly through his hair out of habit, leaving it with his signature 'messy but neat enough it's considered stylish' look, and reflects on what has really only been the first fifteen minutes of his day.

This was not how it was supposed to go.

He was supposed to have woken up to inquisitive words written across one of his limbs, a simple doodle carelessly drawn in boredom on his thigh... hell, he would have even taken messily scrawled reminders on the back of his hand. Anything. Just anything at all to know that his other is out there. His soulmate, alive and well and waiting for Clay to come into their life.

But nothing. Nothing at all.

Clay finishes getting ready for school, sliding each book into his bag at a slow pace, perhaps to try and allow to give himself more time, but eventually relents at the sound of his sister complaining loudly that they're going to be late if he doesn't emerge from his room soon. There's still no sign of black ink crawling across his skin.

He sighs and steps into his hallway. He hasn't even checked his phone since turning off his alarm

knowing what he'll probably see: his parents texting to see if he's found anything as they head out ridiculously early every morning for work and his best friend, Sapnap, texting to probably ask the same thing but definitely less eloquently.

Clay decides he can't face that right now, feeling both sad at the anticlimax of his morning and also feeling stupid for feeling sad because he knows that this is in no way the end of his soul bond, nor not necessarily *not* the beginning just yet. It just sucks that it hasn't happened yet; Clay wants it to happen a lot sooner, he's never been a patient person.

"Are you ready, doofus?"

Drista appears from around the corner as she asks, tone unimpressed and impatient already. *Maybe it runs in the family.* He thinks, bemused.

"Hmm?" Is all Clay can manage as he hurriedly attempts to shove a breakfast bar in his mouth as he stuffs his feet into his shoes.

His sister rolls her eyes before asking again, "When you're done wallowing about not having marks from your soulmate yet, can we leave?"

Clay stops in his actions and gives up on tying his other shoe up altogether, lazily tucking the laces into the sides in a way he knows annoys both his mum and sister.

"What?"

A pointed raise of Drista's eyebrows is all it takes for Clay to relent.

"How did you know?"

She answers with an exasperated scoff, like it's obvious, "I knew as soon as you didn't come bounding out of your room to excitedly tell me, even though I couldn't care less,"

Clay finally lets out light laughter at her words which makes her kind of smile too.

"Am I wrong?"

"No..." Clay answers, attempting to mask his disappointment but definitely failing. He grabs his keys off the side of kitchen counter and throws them up before catching them in his hand again. Drista is watching his actions very carefully.

"You-," She starts before cutting herself off like she can't believe she's about to say what she's about to say. She sighs, "You know that's not the end of it, right?"

"Yeah."

He breathes out lightly, swinging his bag onto his shoulder and moving towards her next to the front door.

"I mean," Drista emits an awkward cough, "They're probably younger than you, or asleep still, or maybe in a different time zo-"

Clay cuts her off gently with a small, appreciative smile and low, "I know, I know. It's okay."

His sister watches his eyes scrutinisingly for a couple more seconds before she seems to relent and shoot him a genuine and rare smile.

“Good,” She follows Clay out of the house as he opens the door and shuts it securely behind them before asking, “Can I stop being super nice to you now?”

Her words manage to bubble genuine and wheezy laughter out of him as they slide into the front of his car and he moves to start up the engine.

“Yes please,” He laughs, shaking his head, “It’s weird.”

She nods at him as they fall into the usual comfortable silence of the journey to their schools, situated just across the road from each other in the centre of town. Clay is sure she knows he is thankful for her supportive words on the day that has always meant so much to him.

A day, which he so eagerly reminds himself, is not over just yet.

“DUDE,” A familiar bellowing tone he would recognise anywhere is uncomfortably received by his ears as Sapnap walks into their first class of the day, “Why haven’t you answered any of my texts?!”

Clay resists the opportunity to roll his eyes, withheld only because he *had* subjected his best friend to a very long text conversation freaking out about his eighteenth birthday and soulmates and everything of the sort until midnight the night before. So he feels a little bad... maybe.

He genuinely still hasn’t checked his phone since waking up, however, trying to avoid the inevitable of admitting the blankness of his skin upon waking this morning and his following disappointment.

“I haven’t looked.” Clay answers truthfully, to which Sapnap replies with an unimpressed huff of breath as he sits himself down next to him.

“Well then...?!”

Sapnap’s tone is still very, very loud and far too enthusiastic for most of the people sitting in their eight am class, earning him a cluster of shushes from those around them. The other boy doesn’t seem to mind, pressing on.

“Did anything happen?”

Clay’s face forms a small and melancholic smile as he realises his friend is almost as excited as he had been this morning. Hearing him speak excitedly about it all last night and throughout the many years before, however, he supposes would do that to a person, invest them.

“No.”

He admits, stomach dropping again at the horrible accompanying feeling; Sapnap’s face similarly visibly falls.

“Oh no, dude, that sucks,” He brings a sturdy hand to grip onto Clay’s shoulder and pats it there comfortingly, or at least, in a hearty attempt to, “I’m sorry.”

Even though Clay reassures him it’s okay, Sapnap doesn’t remove his grounding hand. He finds himself rather glad of this as a tenuous smile can’t help but creep back onto his face.

“When it happens it happens,” Sapnap says confidently, as if declaring it law, “Until then, you can

only wait.”

Clay can't help a whine that emerges from his throat as he buries his head in his arms on his desk like a petulant child.

“I hate waiting.”

He says, but it's largely muffled into his jumper. Sappnap seems to hear all the same, giggling at him and saying he certainly knows that as the teacher starts talking loudly over him, starting the lesson.

Sighing audibly into his arms again, Clay allows his thoughts to drift to another place.

One that's more warm and hopeful. The future.

Clay has to leave Sappnap to go to arithmetic just before lunch. It is certainly not his favourite class, by far, but it is one he seems annoyingly good at, no matter how little he tries. Not that he is complaining, of course.

He settles in to his seat near the back, strategically chosen at the beginning of the year to try and allow himself to zone out and think of other things. It had never worked, however, the teacher always calling on him to answer the problems when the rest of the class could not.

Today, however, he hopes it will serve him well. Allowing him the piece of mind and hopeful quiet he needs to drag his mind off of the smile drawn on his arm and his looming expectations. God, maybe he'll even have to resort to listening to the teacher drone on about maths to distract himself.

As he contemplates all this, staring ahead, fiddling with his pen and waiting for the rest of the class to file in, Clay can't help but catch the girl seated directly in front of him doodling absentmindedly on her forearm, little hearts and swirls. He watches in amazement as black lines soon join her own in looping across her skin; he thinks he sees her smile.

That's what he wants. *That feeling.*

He doesn't even quite know what it is yet, because he hasn't experienced it, but he knows he wants it in his life. And he wants to make his soulmate feel that way too.

His pen falls from his grip as his mind wanders, coaxing him gently back from his thoughts only to spark a new one. Clay tentatively pulls the sleeve of his green hoodie up his arm to reveal the smiley face he had drawn so hopefully mere hours earlier, still beaming so happily even though Clay can no longer share the sentiment.

Quickly, his mind makes a decision and he moves his hand in his usual messy scrawl, unbothered about hiding his imperfections from someone who's going to mean *everything* to him, Clay jots down a small 'hi?' beside the other lines gracing his skin. His heart jolts with his action, though he's not so sure why.

He's honestly tempted to write so much more, to ask eager questions, request information, but then his name is called from the front of the classroom and he's hastily pushing the length of his green sleeve back down his arm.

Clay puts down his pen again as he answers the question from his somehow simultaneously cloudy

and clear mind. He sighs.

He's in for a long day. He can tell.

The ball has missed his hands ten times and counting, or more like he's failed to catch it ten times and counting... either way, football practice isn't going well.

His coach, as well as his fellow players are certainly visibly confused at their star quarterback's sudden clumsiness and fatigue. He does the best he can do; keeps getting back up and apologising, promising he'll get the next and doing it all over again when he inevitably doesn't.

It's when one throw finally hits him square in the face that Sapnap marches right over from his own drills and just straight up drags Clay off the pitch and into the locker rooms again. An act which neither the coach or the other players seem to deem unnecessary, going by their lack of protest.

"Alright. What's up?"

Sapnap finally says when they've both removed their helmets and fall down onto the polished, dark wood of the bench in the tinny locker room.

Even though his friend is giving him his best 'don't give me any bullshit' look, Clay still dares to answer, "Nothing. I'm fine."

A long sigh fills the room, he's not even sure which one of them it was. Maybe them both.

"C'mon, you're totally not dude," Sapnap says, brow furrowed atop his bright and attentive eyes, "You haven't really been all day."

He tries to answer but can't get the words to string together in his mind, let alone in his cotton mouth.

"You know what," His friend's decisive tone grabs his attention back from the depths of his brain, "Let's grab lunch first. Everything is better on a full stomach."

Clay can't stop the quirk of his grin because he thinks of how, one, that is a factual statement and he's *starving* and two, how much he loves his friend for understanding and giving him time.

"Yeah, okay."

He agrees, but the words stick heavily like molasses in his mouth. It's an effort to say.

Finally immersed in the bustle of the cafeteria, Clay is glad to find that the noise seems to relieve some of the weight to his words. Perhaps because the thoughts that have eaten away at him all day are finally drowned out.

Sapnap is very much enjoying his burger that they had bought from the cafeteria, taking large bites but chewing each one over slowly, giving Clay time as he regards him quietly.

"I think-," He starts, moving in closer to his friend when he realises the level of noise in here is louder than he thought.

“I think I’ve placed so much expectation,” He takes a shaky breath, “So- so much hope on this day for so long that now it’s finally here and nothing has happened, I have no idea what to do with all this left over weight hanging over me.”

He draws his eyes away from the table, where they had been for a while, and connects them with Sapnap’s, wide and listening, as he continues with a breathless laugh.

“I don’t- I don’t know what I thought or expected but I’d always just *felt* that my soulmate would be there, you know? On this day.”

His dad had told him years ago that such a thing could happen. In a world where bonds can bind souls together for eternity and ink can crawl across skin of its own regard, a little bit of intuition when it comes to your soulmate is certainly not amiss or unexpected.

“And, uh, now that they’re not, I don’t really know what I’m meant to...”

Clay trails off mid-sentence because Sapnap’s gaze quickly snaps away from his. A frown falls over his face, frustrated this friend’s apparent and sudden lack of attention.

He gives him a few seconds out of consideration but then Clay protests, feeling slight anger and confusion pull at his chest, “Are you even listening, or...?”

He breaks off again as Sapnap waves his hands furiously across the table towards where Clay is currently sitting and leaning on his arms. His friend is emitting a series of fast-paced, excitable breaths and Clay is about ask if *he* is okay when he finally follows the direction of Sapnap’s gestures.

Looking down at his arms which, oh, were now exposed, he must’ve forgotten to slip his hoodie back on after getting changed, he can see the black ink he had previously used stretching across his tanned skin.

Clay is about to laugh and roll his eyes at his friend, thinking Sapnap is going to tease him for his terrible decision for an introduction to his soulmate, but then an even louder and even more distressing noise of exasperation from his friend is what really leads him to the source of this palaver.

His heart stops when he sees it, pounding, thudding and racing in his chest gallantly as his eyes widen and he moves to get a closer look, holding it steady.

Hello :)

The thin black letters are undeniably scrawled across the skin of Clay’s arm, just below where he had hastily added ‘hi?’ to his smiley face from this morning, although it had almost faded away now.

His heart stops and beats again. Five characters of small and neatly looped black ink is all it takes to end his life, apparently. More importantly, five characters of small and neatly looped black ink from his *soulmate*.

“...oh my GOD.”

He exclaims, unable to help himself as an electric pulse seems to amplify throughout his entire body, reviving him back to life and right back into his hopeful and optimistic mindset.

Clay’s not surprised to find he’s jumped out of his seat at the shock and surprise. He’s so lost for

words that all he can find himself able to do is keep glancing from the word written on his arm to Sapnap's beautifully amused and laughter-filled face and back again.

"Dudeeee."

Sapnap draws out between chuckles that soon have Clay joining in, though he's not sure if it's from the surprise, relief or newfound nervousness in his bones.

"Oh my God," Clay repeats, brain still buffering and attempting to recover, "I- uh, wow..."

He's entirely aware and sure that his grin is probably super large, ridiculously wide and as toothy as it's ever been but Clay doesn't care because his *soulmate* just communicated to him for the first time. His freaking *soulmate*.

Belatedly, he realises his hands are shaking from the excitement and pure rush of adrenaline that had surged through him. Another realisation has him turning to Sapnap with startled pressure in his eyes, however.

"What the fuck do I say next?"

He half whispers and exclaims, the two making an interesting combination that makes his best friend laugh even harder at his usually unflappable friend's demeanour.

"Uh, ask their name?" Sapnap suggests with raised eyebrows, probably because that was generally how human communication normally goes.

In his anxious state however, Clay eagerly agrees with puppy-like enthusiasm, "Yes." He takes a gasp breath in between, "Yes, great idea!"

He grasps his pen firmly once it's in hand, now a more sacred object for him to behold; a means of communication between him and the one who will mean the most to him.

What's your name?

Clay writes, perhaps subconsciously attempting to keep his writing kind of neat now to impress his soulmate, and he waits impatiently as he stares at the blank skin around their other words and glances up at Sapnap's as equally interested eyes in the meantime.

He doesn't have to wait long, however, the reply coming almost immediately.

George

Clay feels a giddy grin stagger onto his face. That's so damn cute... he doesn't even know why.

You?

As he watches the words pattern across his skin, standing out beautifully from his tan, Clay can't help but be cast back to this morning, and all the subsequent moments after, when he had worried he may not experience the feeling he's desired to experience for so many years now. He reckons he has a good inkling of what it is now as his heart races alongside his hand racing to write.

Clay

This is the beginning he's been waiting for, and he has no desire to see the end anytime soon.

three years

Chapter Summary

George wakes to find marks from his soulmate on his body after three years of waiting; maybe he's already falling a little bit in love...

Chapter Notes

hey guys!

thank you for being patient with me and for all your support and ideas on the last chapter :)

hope you enjoy <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

George is tossing and turning atop his bed, causing the loose springs to squeak under his weight as he turns to face the wall again.

Another restless night to pile upon three consecutive others. He doesn't know what the cause is. Stress, perhaps.

He hasn't experienced such a feat for years, the last time being back when the white and pale expanse of his open skin was still a bitter reminder of what was forever missing from him.

At the age of nearly twenty-one, he has still never seen nor felt any inkling of the kindling of a soul bond, let alone any communication in black scrawl from his soulmate. Any sane person probably would have given up any hope by now, but George can't let himself, his heart aching and pulling in his chest at the mere thought.

His soulmate is out there. He's convinced of it. Whether they're simply younger than him, already with someone else, or worse... just not interested in him, he doesn't know.

George had held out hope for the first couple of years, trying not to feel sour as he watched his friends couple off into domestic bliss, leaving him starkly behind in more ways than one. Nowadays, his mindset seems to lean towards the latter of the possible options listed in his mind, unfortunately.

The longer life draws on and George feels as though he remains static in time, the more his spark of hope and belief diminishes.

George turns to face the wall again before chucking his sheets off of his body, unable to decide if he feels hot or cold all of a sudden.

His sleep schedule is a mess. The result of gaming late into the night and forced early starts to catch morning lectures in the hall on the other side of campus. Consequently, he sleeps anytime he

can afford to, when he's not swamped by coding projects for class and his part-time job in the tech store downtown.

George doesn't glance at the clock beside his bed, but he'd pin it to be about five pm. The plan was to nap until at least seven to try and catch up on sleep and then hop on his PC to see if he could coax any of his friends into playing CSGO or something, but his plan was unfortunately thwarted by his overactive mind.

He has no idea what's up with him today, he can quite happily say he believes he could sleep through a literal war if it came to it, being a deep sleeper and all. But tonight he's had no luck.

Swinging his legs over the side of his bed with a sigh, George runs a hand through his short, dark hair, flattened heavily on one side where his face was pressed into the pillow on his skinny twin bed.

His uni dorm is nothing much to look at at all: a bed, a wardrobe, a desk, his computer, but it's what he needs and nothing more.

George has never quite been able to ask for more.

The bright light of his phone projects his fears; he'd woken up only an hour into his designated sleeping time. *Dammit*. He doesn't want to fall asleep at his desk later, keyboard and mouse in hand.

He considers absentmindedly what to do for the next few hours or so, contemplates starting that homework for his 'Computational Linear Algebra' class that will probably make him want to smash his head into his monitor out of boredom, but in the end decides to just take a very long and warm shower instead. Maybe it would even send him back to sleep.

Shifting to his feet, George hears half his bones click in a satisfying manner and places his phone back onto the bedside table before he starts pulling his jumper over his head. He staggers over to the wardrobe, half-blind as he does so, and opens one of the doors outwards to replace it.

Belatedly, he glances over at his now over-flowing laundry basket shamefully shoved into the corner of his room and tells himself he must make a trip down to the laundry room for about the third time this week.

He grabs on to the side of the wardrobe door for balance as he strips himself of his socks and lands them successfully on top of the multicoloured pile.

However, when he stretches up his arm to grab one of his many empty hangers off of the rail in the wardrobe, he sees it.

At first he thinks he's accidentally drawn pen on himself again, because being a uni student that tends to happen to him a lot and he doesn't have a soulmate so it couldn't possibly be...

Oh.

George hasn't even picked up a pen today, nor left his dorm room.

He drops his hoodie and the hanger on the floor as he grasps the thin wood of the wardrobe's door, the long mirror stuck into the back reflecting his surprise and disbelief back at him as he turns to expose his arm to the light.

hi?

George's breath is caught in his throat. He lets out a choked laugh as he moves his arm further to find a lopsided and shakily drawn smiley face beside it.

His right hand reaches out to his left arm and cups the skin just below the new illustrations on him; his fingers are shaky as he traces their outlines, and his bottom lip is caught sharply between his teeth.

Three years.

Three dreadful years of not knowing, and now here George is with confirmation that he does in fact have a *soulmate*.

He has another half, a part that will make him whole; a counterbalance to his downfalls and a compliment to his benefits.

His smile is wide and breaks into his cheeks at the thought. *Oh my god.*

George has been waiting too damn long to bother feeling any apprehensiveness at racing to his desk and hurriedly throwing his sheets of paper around until a black biro rolls out and clatters onto the floor.

In three years, you would have thought he would have considered what to say. Perhaps before, when he was still eighteen and expecting and anticipating a message everyday from his soulmate, he had had something stored away and ready to say, but now, after having lost almost all hope, his mind is a blank slate.

His breathing is still funny as he seats himself back on the edge of his bed. His heart is doing strange loop-de-loops too as he continues to stare at his inked arm.

He can recall days in the past where he used to fill his arms with everything and anything he could think of to tell his soulmate, perhaps in a desperate attempt to catch their attention, if they were listening at all.

He'd speak of his exhausting days, funny things his friends had said that had brought near tears to his eyes, the possible names he might pick for his new cat. But he never got anything in return.

There was even days when George had no one to go to, he would still turn to his soulmate, or the mere idea of them, to comfort him.

When his home had broken with the unfaithfulness of his father, despite his parents being a *soulmate pair*, George had had to be strong for his mum as she wept into his arms and his soulmate was the one he would turn to to offload his anger, frustration and desperation. The one he would cling onto.

He traces the lines of the smiley face with the light touch of his index finger as he thinks how this person has already helped him much more than he could've ever asked for.

Clutching the pen tightly in his left hand, George soon switches to his right, deciding it's best to initially reply right under what his soulmate had said to ensure that they see his reply. Forming a whole word with his less-dominant hand requires all of his concentration and the sticking out of his tongue, apparently, but he manages it all the same.

Hello :)

He writes, feeling like he's successfully carried on the cheery precedent his soulmate has set. His

heart pounds so loudly he can hear the even beat in his head, simultaneously calming and terrifying.

George reclines himself across the width of his bed, legs hanging off the edge, as he brings his forearm before him in the light seeping through the small gap in his curtains he still hasn't opened. Sunlight yellow-orange, warming the usual pale coldness of his skin.

A stupid giggle bubbles out of himself again as he reminds himself of whom these simple strokes of pen have come from. There's a warm and pinkish feeling flooding the carved cavities of his heart.

He almost holds his breath as they exchange names.

George.

Clay.

That giddy, wide smile is on his face again he's sure as he buries his face into the deep blue of his duvet cover.

He troubles the end of the pen lid in his mouth as he contemplates whether he wants to know the answer to what he's about to ask next.

Did you, George takes a deep breath as he realises there's no going back now, *just turn eighteen?*

He doesn't really know what he would do if it's any other way. If his soulmate had managed to ignore him this long, or hadn't bothered to reach out to him, even when he was always so brutally honest with the truth and the words he scrawled across his skin, *their* skin, in a sea of black.

Yep.

George exhales a breath he didn't know he was still holding. There's a weight lifted off his heavy and weathered heart and his body is electrified from head to toe in shimmering excitement.

Shouldn't you be wishing me a happy birthday?

The words are smaller and wrap around onto the inside of his arm. Despite feeling himself roll his eyes a little, George giggles. Apparently, he and Clay share a similar disposition in teasing.

Happy birthday! Congratulations on getting older.

He writes, finding the words are coming naturally to him. He beams, glad to find slipping into conversation with his soulmate is as easy as he's always been told it would be.

Thank you.

He receives back with a more cheeky-looking smiley this time, crawling up the side of his wrist.

How old are you?

George hesitates slightly. Only because he feels like he's going to make Clay feel guilty or something for a thing he had absolutely no control over.

21 on the 1st of November.

George doesn't receive an answer within the usual time taken and he begins to worry his chapped

lips again with his teeth as he moves to lean up against the wooden headboard of his bed. His face lights up when he sees black ink crossing his skin once again; he doesn't know how he ever lived without this already. He's never felt so together when so desperately alone.

George...

The next part takes longer to come through, George finds he likes to try and imagine how Clay would say his name, how the syllables would fall from his lips.

I'm so sorry you had to wait so long.

George feels his heart melt a little bit more at his soulmate's somber and sincere words.

It's okay, He writes, even though both he and Clay know it's not, *you're here now.*

It almost scares him how comforting it is to him to write those words onto his skin and finally know that they'll have an answer coming right back.

Yes I am, Stretches across his skin, almost touching the base of his hand from his wrist. George would start to compose his response back, but something tells him Clay isn't quite done.

Soon follows, *I'm not going anywhere. Don't worry.*

George blinks the pearl of a tear in his eye away that he hasn't realised has been forming as he reads his soulmate's words. He thinks it's the first time he's heard someone say that to him in three years, and it's ridiculously reassuring and warm in his chest.

All these years of uncertainty, not knowing and fluctuating between not caring and caring all too much is finally packaged away and replaced with the strong feeling welling within George.

Constancy, security and company. He could ask for nothing more in this moment; he moves the pen to reply slowly as he blinks back more tears pushing his boundaries of restraint.

Thank you.

There's another few seconds or so of hesitation, George can feel it, but the '<3' that soon comes through next to his message is entirely worth the strange sensation of feeling someone else's emotions.

He doesn't really know too much about soulmate things... was feeling *for* each other a thing? He makes a mental note to look into it later.

You're left-handed.

Clay simply writes next, adding a helpful arrow that points from his right arm to his left, making George puff a snort of laughter.

Yes..? He replies, not knowing what else much to say.

It's cute that we have an arm each, Clay starts, George is already smiling fondly, *We're really maximising our space- optimum efficiency.*

George finds himself giggling again, he says, *Sure, left side's your's and right side is mine?*

Yes. Legs too.

Legs?

Well, George's smile still hasn't gone away. He buries his feet under his covers as he watches the rest of Clay's answer appear, I've already filled most of our left arm. How else would I keep talking to you?

This makes George's heart absolutely swoon. His cheeks ache from bunching up even higher and his eyes scrunch up too. (Don't even get him started on the use of 'our'.)

You're an idiot.

He prints neatly under the base of his right thumb, giving the last word an underline for emphasis. He's sure Clay can read the lack of hostility in his words, if not, can feel it through their accumulating bond. His response earns him smiley face beside it.

Hey, what's your favourite colour?

Clay asks out of nowhere as George slips into deep contemplation.

Why?

So I can write to you in it.

George can't stop his small roll of his eyes but also the bubbled breath of laughter that follows.

I'm colourblind... He admits, pretty much the only colour I can remotely see is blue.

:o, Clay's emoji makes him grin again, I'll be buying blue pens from now on then.

George is running out of space on his arm too. He manages to nearly squeeze in the next words on the back of his hand after he situates a wonky smiley face next to Clay's; he supposes they'll get used to managing to keep their conversations more uniform and easy to read.

Do you still go to school?

He asks, thinking about himself when he was eighteen, swamped with assignments from his college before getting in to university.

Unfortunately.

Comes Clay's response. Ah, George thinks with a stretch of a smirk, they have a similar type of work ethic then. Then George checks the calendar he keeps next to his bed and recognises it's a Wednesday.

Are you in class rn?

His careful scrawl is getting smaller and smaller again, squished in between the crux of his wrist.

No, Clay starts, George imagines his voice as low and gets the feeling he isn't done so he waits, I'm skipping,

George stops for a moment and just blinks at the words, processing.

sitting in my car so I can talk to you...

God, this man is still going and George's heart might not just survive.

I've waited for this moment for too long to miss you now.

Blushing bright red and feeling his free hand clutch dangerously tightly onto his sheets, George stares over and over at the words, reading them to himself again and again and again. His lungs aren't working properly and he has to remind himself to take a breath.

There's a minute or so while George is racking his brain for something equally as lovely to say back when black ink appears again, this time smaller than the other words, and it's printed very intimately on the inside of his left wrist.

...George?

A shiver flows through him as he's pulled into their conversation again. He rushes to reply, not wanting Clay to interpret his silence negatively.

I-, The movement of his hand halts for a couple of seconds and he internally curses himself because only he would manage to stutter in a non-verbal conversation, *I'm happy you did, I wouldn't have wanted to miss it for the world.*

He bites his lip as he shifts the balance of the pen in his hand before continuing on, but a certain appearance of jagged letters on his left arm informs him he's been beaten to it.

Leg.

It simply reads, cramped in the corner of his hand, making George laugh out loud. He pulls back the warmth of his duvet cover to see the rest of Clay's message appearing on the pale skin of his left thigh.

Did my last message make you blush? I feel like it did.

George flushes furiously even more, lying back against his pillows and turning to bury his face into their plushness, he curses the power of a soul bond.

No...

He dares to write back uniformly on his right leg, warmth still rushing to all extremities of his body. Red from head to toe.

Aw, Georgie, His eyes widen as he watches the nickname scrawl across his white thigh, but the pressure and gravity of the beat in his heart heightens, *You don't have to be embarrassed ~ I like it.*

George can't take the other man's change in tone, blood rushing to his cheeks as he rushes to write back.

I'm not, shut uuuup

He can imagine Clay's laugh, he thinks it would be loud and carefree, like the confident way he writes. George is sure he could fall in love with it easily.

Realised too late that you might not have been able to read from your thighs right now, lol.

Clay adds suddenly, making George smile.

You're home, I presume?

In my university dorm, He corrects, brushing off the thought all too quickly that no place has ever

truly felt like 'home' to him, *I didn't have classes today.*

Ah, lucky, Clay comments, What do you study?

George sighs a little at this, because this is the part where most people start perceiving him differently for his 'nerdy' interests.

Computer Science.

His writing is small, perhaps Clay will catch on to the fact that he doesn't really want to have to say or explain anymore than he needs to.

George puts off looking across his legs for an answer by reaching over to his beside table to grab a swig of water. It's lukewarm by now, but the liquid adequately parches his dry throat.

Reluctantly, he drags his gaze back to his left thigh to read what he expects to be false interest or just a mere brush off, but instead:

WAIT REALLY?

George huffs a breath of laughter, confused and amused at the same time. He writes a simple 'Yes' back.

Do you code?

He laughs and writes 'Yes' again.

I code too :), Clay scrawls back messily, Like, plugins for games and stuff, just for fun.

George's eyebrows shoot upwards and disappear behind his still-mussed fringe. This is new, he thinks pleasantly to himself as they exchange notes about gaming; he's never met anyone with the same level of enthusiasm for such things. The conversation soon slips into what else they like to do outside of academics.

I play football for my school, Clay writes, George can sense his pride and it makes him stupidly happy for him, Quarterback.

George gets distracted by the fact that Clay must be somewhat muscular and built (and probably *tall*, oh god), so it takes him a second to process the terminology used. Quarterback...? *American* football?

He brushes the whirlwind of emotions engulfing him again to the side to firstly answer Clay.

Oh, wow. So you're-, He writes, desperately attempting to keep his pen steady in his shaky hand, *quite tall?*

George is mainly inferring here from the stereotypical high school jock, he doesn't know a lot about American football at all, let alone English football to begin with.

6' 3"

On appearance of the numbers, George lets out an involuntary gulp. Clay's almost half a foot taller than him... there's currently too many thoughts in George's mind to decipher any of them clearly. He's also inwardly cringing because he knows which question comes next.

What about you?

George puts it off for a bit, staring at the slowly filling canvas of his thigh and honestly considering maybe bending the truth a tad, before he ultimately just gives in.

5' 8"

He admits, nibbling at the chapped skin of his lips as he stares at his other thigh, anticipating Clay's response. The pen clicks rhythmically with the anxious movement of his fingers.

Oh... so, what you're saying is that I could very easily lift you up?

George's breath catches in his throat. He has to let out a series of coughs before he reads the words again carefully. Oh, so they do say what he thought. This confirmation does not bring any remedy to his wild heart.

...Probably.

There's too many mental images and ideas bursting through his mind for him to string together anything more coherent. Then his hand is moving before he even knows what else he wants to say.

What do you look like?

His own question makes him blush. Hastily, he adds, *Like a general description...*

George's chest feels tight with anticipation. Clay's response comes quickly.

Why do you want to know? ;)

I'm kidding, I'm kidding.

I have green eyes and medium-length, dirty-blond hair. My skin is almost always tanned, and sometimes I get freckles.

George forms the mental image in his mind; he's beautiful and tall and handsome and everything George had always hoped his soulmate would be to him.

I would like to know about you too, Clay has added when he looks back down, ... if you don't mind, of course.

Forming a pressed smile, George sucks on his upper lip as he debates what to say.

Of course.

Eyes - dark brown and so is my hair, but it's kind of short, I guess. I don't tan very easily, my skin is pale.

God, he can't help thinking that he definitely pales in comparison to Clay. Even by mere description.

Stop that.

He watches Clay write. George stares, confused, as the younger continues.

I can feel you through the bond, remember?

Oh.

You sound beautiful to me, George's heart palpitations are out of control and his chest this left breathless, *I already think you're cute and funny... I can't wait to see you in real life, I bet you'll blush and I won't be able to stop thinking about how much I want to...*

George's cheeks are a burning and biting red as he watches Clay swiftly cross out the latter part of his sentence. Too late. He's already seen it, and it's already kindled a sparking fire within him, spitting out hopeful flames.

You'll always be beautiful to me.

Clay finally settles on finishing. They both apparently agree to gloss over what had just occurred before. George doesn't know what to say; he draws a misshapen heart on their left leg next to Clay's words instead.

His head feels fuzzy, like the soft yet electric static of a old tv screen. He touches the pad of his thumb to Clay's writing before he feels a stabbing ache at his heart when he is reminded of what he half-realised earlier.

American football... Clay plays American football.

Sucking in a pointless breath, George poses his question. He knows he already knows the answer, and he desperately wants to unlearn it immediately.

Where do you live?

His handwriting is neater and perhaps more composed for such a monumental question.

Florida.

George's heart plummets, hearing the type of answer he was afraid to hear. His soulmate has finally been able to reach for him, but cruelly they remain held out of each other's reach, isolated by deep dark sea.

Clay's next question doesn't come for a couple of minutes. George figures he knows his response won't be a positive one when he writes out, *What about you?*

There's a tear forming at George's eye again, making his vision go glassy, and he blinks it away rapidly in an attempt not to let one piece of simple geographical information ruin their day.

London, England.

A small black dot forms on the skin just above George's left knee, he wonders if Clay is sitting there the same as him; a dull ache spreading across his wounded chest, pen paused against the skin.

Oh, Clay's handwriting reappears after a short while, small and scrunched, *That's quite far from each other :(*

George agrees, sharing the sentiment with a sad face of his own.

Just so you know... this doesn't change anything. At least, for me.

George's heart thumps loudly against his ribcage, almost as if it's attempting to beat its wings to try and fly away to escape. He wipes the remnants of tears from his cheeks and the corners of his eyes with the corner of his soft duvet, before he writes.

It definitely doesn't change anything for me either.

He doesn't know if it's the strange concoction of emotions filling his body right now, or if the strange rush of relief he feels is from Clay or himself, but it feels nice either way.

Good.

Clay's response is short, but George has a feeling that he's more pleased than he lets on. It's a feeling that wraps a soft blanket around George's heart before hugging it tight and not letting it go.

Can I-, There's a pause in the writing of Clay's words currently scrawling across the upper end of his left thigh. George can feel his hesitation before he finishes, *Could we exchange numbers or something?*

George barely holds back his light gasp and a rush of adrenaline knocks into him electrifying his veins. A pleasant rush.

Or should I continue to try and woo you the old fashioned way?

Chuckling, George shoots his message back with a playful glint in his eye as he tools them.

Oh? He begins, already enjoying the opportunity to finally tease Clay all too much, smirk settling on his face, *This is you 'wooing' me?*

Secretly, he can't even bear to think what the next level of Clay's 'wooing' is and whether he will in fact survive it at all.

Yes, and you liked it.

Clay's response is short and assured (and also, George must admit, not factually incorrect), leaving him with a slightly dropped jaw and an idle pen resting across his snow-white skin. Heat is flushing his cheeks; he can feel the difference as he presses the cold, ink-covered backs of his hands to his cheeks to think.

And you're blushing again too... George curses the soul bond a million times over, *I like it when you do that... it feels warm, and I like knowing that I was the one that did it.*

There are no words for George to say as Clay's send pleasant chills up his spine. He feels dazed, and can't help but think of what an absolute mess he would be if he were actually stood in front of the taller man right now. Under his shimmering, emerald gaze.

His mind wanders and he sets it back on task by writing to Clay, *I'll give you my number, but only because you're cute.*

There's a pause in their conversation and George can't help but wonder which emotion he can feel Clay currently processing. It doesn't help that Clay seems to really have the hang of most of the 'soulmates' thing already; of course he would know what George blushing *feels* like. It's entirely unfair.

George prints his phone number as clearly as possible below his last message, Clay promises to text him as soon as he gets home from picking up his sister.

Okay. George says, *I'll see you soon :)*

He'd contemplated between a smiley face and a heart for too long that he just went for the safer in the end. It seems he needn't have, however, as the message he receives from Clay in return quickens his heart and only fuels his furious and apparently now eternal blush.

See you soon, George. <3

With a light thump, George flops back onto to his bed and stretches out his limbs to each corner, not forgetting to admire the beautiful and finally ink-stained nature of his skin... of *their* skin. His and Clay's.

He rests his eyes for a couple of seconds, and before he knows it he drifts into silent slumber effortlessly, dreaming of freckles, blond hair and green eyes.

“Clay.”

George mumbles the name under his breath, testing how it falls from his lips.

Soulmate, his brain supplies almost immediately after, mouth also quirking upwards in the smallest motion.

It's the last echoing thought that reverberates in his mind before sleep takes him.

Chapter End Notes

there's certainly more coming for this fic so hang in there!

updates will most likely be weekly but more like whenever i can find the time as i have exams soon ;-;

hearts

Chapter Summary

Clay's mind is occupied with nothing other than George after his first full conversation with his soulmate. Their bond only continues to grow stronger.

Chapter Notes

hey guys

i managed to make the weekly update despite everything and it's a long one!! <3

this is definitely my favourite chapter so far...

hope you enjoy :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

See you soon, George. <3

Fuck. His damn heart is nearly beating its way out of his chest, bursting smilingly against his rib cage with every thumping pulse.

Clay feels exhausted but in the best way possible, the pace of his heart palpitating similarly to that of when his coach forces him and his team to run the mile the entire time he was conversing with George.

The words exchanged between them lasted God knows how long. Clay studies the black lines that are sketched across his skin, ink glittering under the afternoon sun. He cranks up the air conditioning in his car and puffs out a light breath as he fingers the letters on his arms, wrists and legs.

He thinks of the description his soulmate had given of himself. Clay is *very* excited and intrigued to find that George is shorter than him; he pictures a small, brown-eyed boy looking up at his face through full lashes as they stand less than a foot apart.

Clay imagines short dark hair contrasted with sparkling pale skin and a plane of porcelain exposed neck. In his mind, he reaches for the other man, hand moving slowly through the air as if pushing against the current of a river, before his hand lands on a warm and red cheek.

A sharpish breath escapes out of Clay's mouth as imaginary George nestles his face into the palm of his hand. He can feel himself doing it, but that doesn't mean he wants to stop as he lets his eyes dart down to George's pinkish lips, subtly parted. The scene seems to still, wobbling in his mind like the ripple of waves passing through a mirrored lake, before he can voice anything.

God.

He might just die when he finally gets to see George in the flesh. To have the ability to touch him. *Hold* him. It's so overwhelming.

Clay had wanted to do nothing more when the other had told him of his age, of the unspoken three years he had been subjected to waiting just because he was too young. Clay doesn't even know who to curse in retribution for forcing his soulmate, who already seems so soft and kind-hearted in his eyes, to years of uncertain solitude.

Fuck, Clay had even struggled to make it through one day...

His parents had long ago told him of the feeling when you physically touch your soulmate for the first time.

"It's different for everyone," His dad had said, wrapping a strong arm around his mum, "We've always said that ours was like slipping into a warm and comforting deep sea."

His mum had looked dreamily at his dad at this point; she does that a lot.

"So, it could be anything?"

A younger and inquisitive Clay had asked with bright and eager eyes, anticipation lacing his voice. Unfortunately, his question was not narrowed down by his father's response of, "Anything at all, son. Anything at all."

Leaning his head against the cool glass of his car's window, Clay lets himself wonder what the sensation will possibly feel like for him and George.

When he had felt George's bashfulness for the first time through their soul bond, Clay had been taken aback immediately by the rush of warmth he felt through his body and all over his skin, blooming red like roses.

He'd felt the need to protect, a need to shelter George from the rest of the world, keep him safe and out of harm's way and warm him up (preferably against his own skin). It was such an intense sensation that he'd had to gather himself again quickly to be able to continue to write to George coherently.

So, maybe their bond will feel like flowers, pushing up through the soil and towards the glowing sun. Or perhaps colours bursting against a magnolia canvas, scattering, mixing idly and spreading widely into the unknown.

Perhaps he's already taking this way too seriously. The voice inside his head provides, he runs a practiced hand through his hair and makes himself chuckle. Either way, whatever the feeling is, he can feel it strengthening and rising within.

He returns to the image of George he has created in his mind. He wears a pale light blue, probably because Clay had engrained his favourite colour in his mind mere moments before. George's dark eyes sparkle in the bright corner of his mind he's tucked all information about his soulmate into.

There's so much pure eagerness and hope in the shorter man's eyes that Clay finds himself thinking he would *significantly harm* anyone who dared to strip any of that away. He falls into thinking about the perfect arch of George's brows, rose-pink dusted across his precious skin and his dimples (Clay *definitely* believes George has dimples) poking into the flesh of his cheeks.

Would George's hair be long enough to fall in front of his face like Clay's? Or, would it be short enough that a wandering hand could easily slip through the strands?

Clay will not relent on the idea that George definitely pouts when he doesn't get his way or is subjected to light teasing, his pinkish lips pushing out subconsciously. He tries desperately not to think of how kissable they would totally be; they'd probably burn red under the heat of another mouth, catching fire with the kindling of-

"Hey idiot," Clay jumps out of his absolute skin as the sharp noise of knuckles colliding with the window he's currently leaning up against, "Are we going home or what?"

Looking up, he's met with the unimpressed face of his younger sister. Already knowing he's been caught out in a daydream, he doesn't bother to cover his tracks, merely gesturing for her to climb in the front seat.

Drista gives him a reproachful look but doesn't say anything, perhaps recalling their conversation from this morning. Clay tries his best to hide his smile, perhaps wanting to be selfish for once and have the knowledge of George all to himself for at least a little bit longer.

He starts the ignition and his car roars to life, filling the steady silence on their familiar route home. After about two minutes, Drista asks, "Can I plug my phone into the AUX?"

"Sure."

Clay answers, not really thinking about things that weren't currently *George*. There's about ten seconds of pregnant silence and lack of movement that follow his answer, causing him to glance over curiously at his sister as they pull to a stop at a red light.

"Okay..." Drista starts, hand already pressed into her hair from disbelief, "Why are you so *happy*?"

Glancing at her with his best mock-confusion, Clay asks her what she means. This earns him a roll of her familiarly green eyes.

"You only ever let me play my music in the car when you're, like, super super happy. Like that time the other week on the way back from your football game," She points out with widened eyes inclined at Clay, "All the other times you just tell me my taste is shit and then continue to play those same five songs you loop on Spotify."

He splutters into his protest, which he wishes didn't happen, "Oh fuck off, I have more than five songs."

The light changes to green, flashing steadily above them, and Clay eases onto the accelerator. Drista goes quiet again (which is never a good sign).

"What?!"

He asks, frustrated, when he meets her raised eyebrows again.

"You didn't deny it!" She exclaims loudly with a wide and knowing grin, prickling Clay's eardrum uncomfortably, "Oh my god, you ARE super excited about something!"

Clay chuckles as he watches her almost bounce up and down in her seat as they pull into the drive behind their parents' cars. For all their fighting and joking, Clay knows Drista is aware of how much finding his soulmate means to him, and it warms his insides to see her so excited for him.

The sleeves of his hoodie are rolled back down by now, air conditioning having icily chilled his skin, concealing his and George's exchanges that pan across the expanse of his tanned arms. His legs are now covered too, having slipped his gym jogging bottoms back over his shorts (with great

difficulty) in his car when he and George had temporarily halted their conversation.

Never one to shy away from dramatics, Clay holds his sister's gaze for too many seconds before he simply pulls up the right sleeve of his jumper, exposing the majority of George's words back into the air making him shiver, shortly followed by his own by tugging up the fabric on his left arm too. Even upon second inspection, Clay still thinks the newly penned chaos looks beautiful on his skin; he never wants to see it bare again.

A loud gasp comes from Drista's direction, something which doesn't happen often and so really makes Clay burst into a wheeze of laughter as she desperately attempts to shout over him.

"They replied?!"

Still wheezing lightly, Clay manages to nod before running another subconscious hand through his hair. He watches his sister squint her eyes as she attempts to make out their messy and lop-sided letters before suddenly yanking down both of his sleeves again.

"What? Why?" Drista complains with a whine, dragging out the phonetic sounds.

"I am *not* letting you read our messages just to make fun of me."

His sister laughs loudly; it's different to his, but still distinctive and wheezy.

"Fine," She relents, letting Clay relax slightly against the cool leather of his seat, "Name at least?"

She bats her eyelashes teasingly and pleadingly as Clay rolls his eyes before giving in. Even admitting to himself that he probably says it with a little bit of pride.

"George."

Drista smiles happily at him before clapping her hands excitedly. Belatedly, Clay realises this is the first time his soulmate's name has verbally passed his lips; he likes the way it sounds.

"I'm really happy for you."

She tells him sincerely, giving him an affectionate, yet sharp, poke to the shoulder, a habit they never really dropped from when they were kids.

"Thanks, D."

Her nose wrinkles up at the use of the nickname and he lets out a laugh before they both decide to finally climb out of the car and ascend up the driveway. Clay hits the doorbell because he knows his parents are back already and he's too lazy to use his key.

As they wait, Drista asks, "So... I can be mean again now, right?"

Clay pauses and his eyebrows freeze in a raised position.

"Uh, sure?"

He immediately starts to regret his answer when a near-devilish grin spreads across her face. *Oh no.*

Before he can ask any further, however, their mum appears at the door, opening it with a satisfying 'click'. Clay sighs thinking that he's at least safe from whatever it is now.

“Hey kids!” His mum greets cheerfully, ushering them in and planting mandatory kisses to their cheeks, making their faces scrunch up, “How were your-“

“Clay has a soulmate!”

Drista suddenly exclaims loudly, attracting the quick attention of both him and his mum with almost equal expressions of surprise, although Clay’s also contains exasperation. He was not safe after all. *Damn.*

Sighing defeatedly and turning back to face his mum, Clay reaches the conclusion that it doesn’t matter anyway, as he was planning on telling them, being a very close-knit family unit and all, it’s just sooner than he was mentally prepared for.

The gaze of his mother is at first unreadable, staring, brow furrowed at Drista’s claim, before soon suddenly leaping into a sheer spectrum of surprise, shock and amazement. She looks back and forth between Clay and Drista with wide eyes; he can see her question, *is it true?*

He supposes it must be the small slip of a smile onto his face that betrays him as his mum’s face soon blossoms into an expression of immense glee before he’s engulfed in a crushing hug.

“Oh my God, Clay!” She says into his shoulder, sounding breathless and perhaps a little teary, “When you didn’t text all day... we presumed...”

She trails off but Clay knows what she means, up until about two hours ago that had still been true anyway. Pulling away from their hug, she shoots him a large and reassuring smile to which Clay is sure to return.

“I suppose that doesn’t matter now. Your dad and I — oh. Oh! Wait,” Words still fast-paced and frazzled, his mum turns to call down the hallway, “Jack... Jack! Our son’s got himself a soulmate already!”

There’s a loud thud of something dropping onto carpeted floor that comes from the lounge before Clay’s dad’s grey head of hair appears in the doorway, a little out of breath from the quick movement.

“Really?!”

He exclaims loudly, coming out as more of a bellow, grinning at first over to Clay and then back to his wife. Clay gives him a small nod as he fails to hold back the creeping smile on his face.

“Yeah.” He breathes out to no one in particular.

His mum’s hand on his arm drags his mind back into the room.

“Oh, Honey. You have to tell us everything!”

Clay feels like sighing a little, just wanting nothing more than to get into his room and be able to talk to George again. He looks to his dad firstly for help, which is a failure because he looks just as excited and invested as his mum, and then over to Drista, who just gives him a teasing smirk and an unhelpful thumbs up before sprinting off up the stairs.

Starting with a long inhale of air, Clay recounts his day to his parents at the kitchen table. He can’t help but beam as he tells them the main details, leaving the little cute things George does that he already treasures to himself. His parents listen eagerly and he thinks his mum might even have another tear in her eye, but she blinks it away quickly when she sees him looking.

“Well,” His dad starts with a firm pat to his arm before he leaves it there, “I’m so glad and proud of you, son. It’s great to see you so happy.”

His mum nods along beside him, eyes still glistening, before asking, “What was their name again? George?”

Clay smiles as he fingers the hem of the arm of his hoodie where it barely covers the black lines on the back of his hands. Breathlessly, he agrees, “Yeah, George.”

She looks on the edge of happy-crying again and Clay reaches across the table to grab her hand, which she squeezes gratefully.

“Gosh,” She begins with a choked laugh, “I don’t know what’s wrong with me; you’re just growing up so fast..!”

Clay leaves his chair and round the table to pull her into a hug.

“Thanks mum.” He whispers beside her head for nothing in particular, before they pull back and his dad rests a steady hand on his shoulder, shooting him a reassuring smile.

“Well, I was going to do something simple tonight for dinner, but maybe this calls for more of a celebration instead?” His mum suggests with an eager smile, “What do you want, honey? Takeaway?”

Clay thinks about it for a second before the clock on the oven catches his eye. *Six o’ clock? Since when was it that late already?*

There’s an even deeper pang of realisation when he remembers he’s left George waiting on him to message. God, he’d really got too immersed in the excitement of everything.

“Ah, um,” He starts eloquently, meeting the kind gazes of both his parents, “I’d love to, but I kind of told George I would -“

“Oh, darling. Don’t worry! We won’t get in your way.”

His mum exclaims with a wide and knowing smile before she’s already backing out of the room and into the lounge, taking her husband with her.

“Just let us know if you want anything!”

Clay chuckles to himself as he watches them go, thanking them lightly too. He truly loves his family and owes so, so much to them. His blood is still buzzing as a result of all the excess excited energy in the room.

Grabbing his schoolbag hastily, he swings himself round the banister pole and bounds up the stairs, his long legs finally useful for something other than sport and getting cramped on public transport.

He chucks it onto his desk and jumps eagerly onto his bed. With great difficulty, he shimmies off his jogging bottoms, leaving him in the emerald green colours of his school’s gym shorts.

His movements slow for a split second as he grazes light fingers over the marks made on George’s side of their skin. Butterflies flutter by in his heart as he slides his phone out of his pocket.

The first thing he sees is a good few messages from Sapnap:

12:39 *told teachers you had a headache and went home*

12:40 *wasn't too hard to make everyone believe after u got hit with that football in practice lol*

12:40 *how's it going?*

16:21 *... very well i presume?? happy for u bro*

Clay grins at his phone before typing out a very brief reply of thanks and that it is in fact going very well, but that he'd tell him more about it tomorrow.

18:05 *ok! see u tmrw dude, pls don't go all sappy on me*

Clay just chuckles a little maniacally as he just sends back a a smiley face and a screenshot of Sapnap's new contact profile in his phone: *'sappy nappy<3'*

18:07 *fuck u*

18:07 *see u tmrw dickhead*

He shakes his head fondly as he shakily slows his movements and goes to add a new contact to his phone: *'george'*. He leaves it as that for now, eager to actually finally text the other man.

As soon as he finishes typing the number George had scrawled across his right thigh, he double and triple checks before he starts to compose a message to him.

He must admit his finger had hovered over the 'call' button, but he doesn't know what George is entirely comfortable with yet and he doesn't want to rush him into anything he doesn't want... he wants to do this *right*.

Clay bites his tongue between his teeth as he types, concentrating.

hey george

Seems like a good start.

it's clay, i'm so sorry it took long for me to message

Hitting send without allowing himself to overthink it too much, Clay drops his phone onto his duvet and leans back against his cool, white sheets, feeling the aches in his muscles drift away.

The response comes surprisingly quickly, a light 'ding' sounding through his room as he picks his phone back up with enthusiasm.

don't worry! it's fine :)

Clay's stomach falls as he has a feeling it's anything but, but he's having a hard time pinning down George's whirling emotions again. It seems to be hard to identify the first time and then, afterwards, Clay can feel the similarities between the different sensations; it's why he'd been so sure George had blushed a second time at his words.

That feeling was light and fluffy and warmed his skin like the orange lick of a summer sun.

This. He doesn't like this.

His body feels heavy, like lead, and there's a bitter taste in his mouth.

i was starting to think you were already sick of me haha

Oh.

So that's it. George thinks he doesn't want him. That he's decided he's had enough already and moved on.

His mind throbs as he struggles to process everything at once. George thinks he doesn't *want* him. Clay can't even begin to try and explain just how ridiculously wrong he is.

NO george, no no no no

asdfsjsj i'm so sorry i made you think something like that for even one second

i am NOT sick of you already, definitely not

the opposite really. i was so excited and caught up in talking to my family about you that i lost track of the time...

i'm so so sorry, george.

He can't fit the rest of his feelings into words, so he waits.

The three dots signifying George is typing flicker up and down for a couple of minutes before Clay gets a response. His heart is palpitating feverishly in his chest but he can't quite pinpoint whether that's coming from him or George.

As a whole he feels light and airy, the weight sitting low in his stomach is finally gone. He breathes out a soft huff of relief.

god, i keep forgetting you can feel things...

George writes, Clay waits patiently but smiles softly when Patches jumps up onto his bed and bumps the back of his hand with her head.

i guess you can already tell that i feel a lot better now...

i'm sorry i thought like that, it was stupid... i know :(

His mouth quirks up slightly at his soulmate's words, but his brow furrows.

don't ever be sorry for how you feel, george.

especially with me.

His heart beats a lot faster as he types out these words, but he hits send with no second thoughts, desperately needing George to understand his worth.

okay.

Is all he gets back, but it satisfies Clay immensely to feel his feelings return to a neutral and comforting indifference. Suddenly, an idea pops into his head and he wastes no time in implementing it by stretching across to his bedside table to collect the black biro he keeps there.

He draws a small and neat heart carefully on the lower part of his left thumb, thanking his past self for leaving it blank for this moment and presuming that George will quickly notice it with the way he's probably holding his phone.

Feeling a familiar warmth brushing up against his insides, Clay grins widely as he adds as many small hearts as he can fit to the side of George's left hand. Willing him to understand.

His assumptions of his position are confirmed when his phone vibrates, alerting him to George's message.

you're such an idiot...

Clay can imagine his sweet laugh and how it probably turns into more of a giggle towards the end before finishing breathlessly. His heart wells and finally bursts when he sees George begin to do the same to his right hand.

you love it, Clay sends him, you're doing it too... doesn't that make you one?

maybe...

maybe not...

He chuckles lightly at his response, mildly disturbing Patches from where she's curled up beside him. Clay apologises and shushes her as he pets her lightly on the head in the way he knows will make her purr loudly.

i laughed and almost made my cat leave :(

awwww.

can i see?

Clay grins as he selects the camera app on his phone and lines up a cute shot of Patches curled into his side. It's not until he goes to send it to George that he realises most the skin of his thigh is visible where his shorts have slightly ridden up. Their earlier conversations crawling across him.

Hitting send to George, after adding a caption of 'my baby', it doesn't take long for Clay to receive a reply of cute emojis from George. Then there's a few seconds and he receives a photo of a small grey cat balanced on what Clay resumes is George's chest. He attempts desperately not to get distracted by the glistening and blank expanse of neck and collar bone on show from the low-cut top he wears in the photo. Unfortunately, his face is not on show.

this is cat:)

God, Clay hopes George can't feel his distraction right now, or is at least confused as to what it is.

cute <3

wait, their name is 'cat'.

George replies with a curt 'yes' and makes Clay burst into a light wheeze because he's too *cute*.

he still lives at home tho, i miss him :(

Homesickness, Clay thinks then, finally able to identify the pulling tug at his chest. He does his best to send some reassuring words as they talk idly for a few minutes about things happening in their lives; George has looming university exams, Clay has football games.

when's your next one?

George types, his interest making Clay smile giddily.

tomorrow, actually. regional title final.

i have no idea what that means, but it sounds important so good luck!

Clay chuckles fondly and runs a hand through his hair. He hopes his coach will still let him play, even after his dreadful performance in training today... either way it was worth it. He could talk to George for absolutely hours.

There's a long yawn that's emitted from his mouth; he can soon feel an omnipresent fatigue over his body too. He takes a guess.

george... are you supposed to be sleeping right now?

A long moment of silence tells him he's correct.

please don't stay up too long for me, you probably have class or something tomorrow and i can literally feel you falling asleep.

Clay rolls over onto his side and hastily flicks his fringe out of the way as he watches his soulmate reply.

i just wanna keep talking to you...

A small sad face appears on his thumb widening his smile. It tugs at his heartstrings immensely and Clay wants nothing more to stay up and talk and talk and talk with George, but not at a detriment to the other.

i know, He types, because he most certainly does (he ignores the strong urge to place a pet name here, baby, darling), but i'm still going to be here in the morning

George appears to contemplate this for a few seconds before he reluctantly agrees.

ok :(

i'll see you in the morning then, i guess. i'll be up before you so let me know when you wake up ♡

Clay can't suppress the large and toothy grin that sparks onto his face. He feels warm all over, a stark contrast to the cold and almost disappointing start to his birthday.

He pauses for a moment when he remembers this fact, his entire day having centred around his soulmate, around *George*. He really is eighteen now, huh.

Clay couldn't have asked for a better gift; someone who understands and feels him so fully, shares his interests and tastes and rebounds off of his personality so perfectly. Someone who's cute demeanour has already had him smiling fondly and he's never even seen George's face, nor heard his voice.

Making a mental note that the latter, at least, certainly has to happen soon, (he's *dying* to hear what he's sure is a stifled and bashful laugh as he makes him blush) he types out his final reply for the night.

goodnight, george ♥

see you in the morning.

~

A blinding stream of Floridian sun coaxes him out of his slumber the next morning. Clay can feel the heat of it against his skin even in the coolness of his air-conditioned room; today is probably going to be sweltering.

He pushes the thin sheets he'd slept in off of his body, muscles still laced with slowness, and turns his head in the opposite direction to the crack of light that persists in bursting through the gap in his curtains. There's a soft tickle on his nose as his blond hair falls forwards with his motion.

Cracking open a reluctant eye, Clay glances at the clock beside his bed and supposes he should really get up. He's beaten his alarm, which doesn't happen often, but today's a good day as any to get a head start on the world.

It's not until he picks up his phone that he recalls the events of the previous day, grogginess clouding and dazing his mind, making it fuzzy. Eagerly, he sits himself up in his double bed and leans against the cool oak of his headboard; his movements only spin his mind further and it takes a couple of seconds for his eyes to come back into focus (he's *really* not a morning person).

The light chuckles he emits under his breath halt quickly, however, as he studies the expanse of his skin.

Empty.

His left arm, his right, everywhere he remembers exchanging careful and conspicuous words with George, empty.

It's too early in the morning for this. His mind spins frantically as he falls into an abyss of endless questions: did yesterday even *happen*? Or was it all a powerful concoction of his ever over-active mind? A perfect dream of the perfect soulmate... wishful thinking?

Clay's mind is so loud and busy that he finally decides he can't take it anymore. He hastily discards his phone onto his bed with a soft 'thump' and barely saves it from sliding off the edge as he clumsily fumbles around on his bedside table for his pen.

Uncapping it carelessly, he doesn't hesitate as he writes. He wants to know, he *has* to know.

George

He doesn't know what he will do if it turns out to be untrue, a cruel image of his mind. His heart is thudding ridiculously loud in his chest, banging against his ribs like a caged animal. His stomach is somewhere on the floor; he thinks vaguely that this is what suffocating feels like.

Yes?

Clay's breath is expelled from his lungs loudly, shuddering out against his lips as he brings one of his hands to ease his unfurling brow. He scrunches his eyes up tight. Scraggly, uneven letters have never made him feel so relieved and at ease before.

Are you okay? Continue the words on his skin, *You don't feel okay...*

Huffing out a breath again to try and allow his heart to catch back onto a steady beat, Clay does his best to keep his hand calm as he replies.

I-, His mind isn't functioning properly, still racing wildly and winding slowly back down, he crosses it out and tries again.

I thought that-, He scribbles over the ink again, all of a sudden feeling stupid. Shaking his head at himself and letting out a puff of a laugh, he composes the now principal question on his mind.

Never mind, it's alright now.

I promise. He adds when George doesn't feel convinced.

What happened to our arms?

Clay manages to ask, finally reaching the point. He waits for his soulmate's answer to appear patiently.

Oh, I took a shower and I really tried my best to keep it all out of the water but it didn't work :(

A grin works its way onto Clay's cheeks as he bites his lip to process George's words (and his mind is definitely *not* trying to process the idea of George in the shower...). Why does his soulmate have to be so damn cute?

It's okay! He says to reassure George, feeling his disappointment through the bond, *That means more room for today :)*

A sensation that feels like the spark of a flint against steel bursts in his chest and he warms as it floods across his skin. Clay wants George to feel like that all the time.

Yeah, for today :)

A loud blaring tone suddenly erupts into his room, scaring the life out of him and making him draw an accidental line in biro against their skin. Swearing, he hastily erases it with a lick of his thumb before he moves to turn off his alarm signalling the beginning of another monotonous school day.

He begins to move to swing himself out of bed and onto his feet to go and freshen up in the bathroom when he realises he's received another message from George on his skin.

Did you see my other message?

Confused, Clay quickly checks the fronts and backs of both of his arms, exposing them to the sunlight, but still he can only see the conversation he had started only a minute ago. In anticipation, he leaps out of the comfort of his bed and into his en-suite to skid to a halt in front of the long, full-

length mirror situated beside the sink.

As he studies the tanned expanse of his skin after carelessly pulling his shirt over his head, Clay can't help but be reminded of his actions that were oh so similar only a day before; so much has changed since, and all entirely for the better.

His heart is beating eagerly as he scans meticulously with his eyes, every freckle across his body attracting his gaze mistaking it for a stray dot of pen. Clay double checks his arms and chest again and is about to get even more confused when he finally spots the remnants of ink on the top of his left thigh. He glances downwards to read it.

Good luck in your game today! I'm sure you'll win. ♡

A warm and blessed feeling wraps its way around Clay's heart like the arms of the most welcome hug. Clay wishes he could hug George so, so much right now. He lays his curses on geography.

Making eye-contact with his own flushed face in the mirror, Clay displays the widest and most toothiest grin he has in a long while. It's a struggle to rip himself away from studying the pretty words against his skin, but he manages it, wary of the wrath of his sister if he dares to be almost late for school *again*.

A light slap on the back of his head alerts him to the arrival of his best friend. Clay shoots him a half-hearted middle finger as he slides into the desk next to him, although his neutral expression cracks almost immediately under the expectant expression of Sapnap's gaze.

"Come onnnn," The younger man breaks the silence between them supplemented by a gaze, "What's their name?"

Sapnap's tone is loud and Clay has the right mind to shush him, but in this moment he's too happy to care.

"George," He tells him proudly, fiddling with the edge of his hoodie sleeve that he had reluctantly pulled on this morning. Sapnap is still gazing at him with half-raised eyebrows, clearly expecting more.

"He's-," Clay pauses as he tries to think of a verbal and coherent way that captures what George already means to him. Nothing he can find suffices, so he settles on finishing, "He's amazing."

There's a warmth in his cheeks and a small smile pulling at the left side of his mouth as he speaks. His hands don't stop playing with the soft material.

His friend seems to regard and process his words for a short while, before Clay can practically see his face filter through a multitude of emotions. Sapnap finally seems to settle on one when he makes a false gagging noise and mimes sticking his fingers down his throat. Clay gives him a shove in his seat with a heavy wheeze.

"Shut up, dude."

Sapnap quickly joins in with his laughter, banging his hand on the table perhaps a little too enthusiastically. This lasts for a short while before their noise slows and Clay realises Sapnap is studying the features of his face almost carefully. The thought causes him to scrunch up his nose instinctively, causing the other to laugh again.

“Seriously, Clay. I’m so happy and excited for you! You deserve it more than anyone.”

His friend’s sincere words warm his body and he lets what he knows is a soft smile appear on his cheeks as he thanks Sapnap graciously in return.

Clay is about to delve further into their conversation when the teacher waltzes her way into the room. Spanish. Great.

He gives Sapnap a warm smile that conveys that he’ll finish the rest of his story at lunch, he receives a nod in return before they both turn their attention back to the class.

The only bearable thing about having Spanish first thing in the morning is having his best friend next to him. He shifts around in his seat uncomfortably for a few minutes before finally deciding he’s way too hot.

Clay hesitates with the bottom of his jumper for a second, aware of what’s written on his arms. There’s no rule against it at school, people having soul-bonds and soulmates being a large staple of society and all, and looking around, Clay can see about three other people with ink penned across their skin and out in the open. It’s not a taboo thing to do, and Clay is certainly not ashamed in any way, it’s just that it almost feels like something personal. Something so intimate shared between him and George that he doesn’t want anyone else to be able to see.

On the other hand, Clay thinks he might actually spontaneously combust if he doesn’t remove the fleeced garment from his skin, so his hand is kind of being forced by nature here. With as little disruption as possible, Clay manages to slip the hoodie over his head and place it over the back of his chair.

His eyes focus on the words scrawled across his skin that he and George had both just written mere hours before; they had continued speaking long after Clay had seen his cute words of encouragement in the mirror.

Initially, he feels slightly on edge, antsy, and almost downright protective of what’s written on his skin, but soon after glancing around at the people surrounding him, Clay realises that no one is looking or has even really noticed.

Being the star quarterback of his school’s football team, he knows it’s inevitable that word will get round that Clay has marks patterned across his skin, Clay has a *soulmate*. But, for now, this is still something for him, and he makes sure to treasure it in every way.

Eventually, he relaxes back into the hard plastic of his chair and half zones back into what the teacher is explaining at the front, finally feeling at ease again. This doesn’t last long, however, as his heart rate spikes at the appearance of black letters crawling across his skin.

You in class?

Clay doesn’t even attempt to hide his shy smile as he picks up his pen for the first time since the beginning of the lesson to reply to George.

Yeah, you?

Just left a lecture. Honestly, the prof’s voice was so monotone I think five more minutes would have actually driven me crazy.

Clay only just manages to stifle his brief laugh into a cough, although Sapnap doesn’t appear convinced, shooting him an inquisitive yet amused grin from the side.

Do you mind me writing to you at school?

Do you care about people seeing?

Rushing to reply with a frantic pulse in his heart, Clay writes as his Spanish teacher continues to drawl on at the front.

No, no. Not at all.

He can feel a light and giddy feeling settle in his chest, similar to that of when one exits a rollercoaster, windswept and wide-eyed.

:) *Good.* Wraps across his right arm. Clay waits patiently for a couple of minutes thinking that George surely has more to say if he is asking such a question, but his eyebrows knit together as he tries to covertly check over the expanse of his whole arms, he even sticks his legs out a little from under the table, faking a large stretch, to see if his soulmate had written there instead.

Nothing.

Clay tries his best not to feel disappointed, pleasant feeling in his chest wobbling a little, but he doesn't think too much of it; something probably just came up for George that he'd hear about later.

He resorts back to chewing idly on the bitten skin of his lips when he notices black ink appearing on his skin again, Clay makes an involuntary jolt in his chair in excitement causing it to squeak as it moves against the linoleum floor. Luckily though, no one seems to be all that interested apart from Sapnap.

The breath in his lungs is knocked out of him as he watches the plane of his tan arms become decorated with tiny hearts and smiley faces. Clay's face blushes an immense red as he smiles at the illustrations appearing across his skin, doing his utmost to withhold a breathless chuckle.

Clay's own heart has already started beating faster, but the sensation increases tenfold when he supposes George realises he reacts so strongly to the appearance of his playful drawings.

Oh, Appears on his right arm, the letters compact and calculated, *so you like that?*

This time a tiny gasp of air manages to escape his traitorous lips. Shifting his body, Clay's muscles tense against his wooden-backed seat, he finds himself wrapping his arms protectively over himself as well, where the sea of hearts has continued to grow. He doesn't have to even look over to Sapnap to know that he's being watched with excitement, amusement and withheld laughter.

What do you think?

He poses back, knowing George will be able to feel the lack of malice behind his question. Shimmering sensations, bright like glitter, soon start filling him, George is *pleased* to have made Clay feel such a way.

God. Clay really wishes he weren't in Spanish class right now. Literally anywhere else. Please.

With a defeated and uncaringly loud sigh, Clay deflates and rests his face with its pink-stained cheeks on his hands atop the desk before him. Even from here he can still make out the clutter of hearts across his arms.

He's grinning so stupidly wide against his hands that it almost aches in his cheeks. His heart

competes against his mind at a million miles an hour in a race that has neither a start nor an end.

He breathes out. Five more periods to go.

Chapter End Notes

i've been thriving off of all the support you have all given me! thank you so, so much,
it really motivates me<3

number seven

Chapter Summary

George and Clay hear each other's voices for the first time and George receives some exciting news.

Chapter Notes

hey everyone!

kinda ironic how i said i had exams and might be busy but then ended up writing the two longest chapters of this fic during those weeks lol - dnf are just too addictive to write, i swear

hope you enjoy <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Your game should start soon, right?

George pens neatly across his skin and that of his soulmate's too.

Hopefully I worked the times out correctly and stuff... time zones suck :(

He finishes writing and caps his pen, placing it down beside the very large and very heavy textbook he should be currently attempting to read.

The university library is a tall and weathered building with multiple iron staircases winding lavishly upwards into the rafters from each corner, and books stacked neatly in every possible nook and cranny. There's a gentle backdrop of pens against paper, a rustle of sheets and the loud hum of the near-ancient computers they still keep for some reason in the back rows.

George likes the library because it's anything *but* quiet, rather ironically.

He's currently seated in a corner, his favourite since first year; it's right beside the ComSci section of the library, which was and always has been frustratingly small and limited, and tucked far enough away from the librarian's desk at the front that he can get away with talking quietly with his friends, if need be.

Yes soon!

George sees scrawl across his left forearm and causing yet another stupid grin to spawn across his cheeks.

Feeling pumped about it, hopefully it'll go well :)

I'm sure it will, I'll be sending you all my energy!

He replies quickly, feeling secondary shivers from what must be Clay's exhilaration. Apparently it takes quite a while to get used to feeling for two people instead of one; that doesn't mean George doesn't find it massively comforting whenever he can feel his soulmate's presence, however.

Clay tells him he has to warm up now, bringing a tinge of disappointment on both ends of their bond, but reassures George by telling him he'll let him know how it goes. George is sure he'll probably feel it too, but he thanks him anyway with a small smile drawn beside Clay's message.

Finally managing to turn his attention back to his work, he only completes half of the next question his lecturer had set before he's party to more interruption.

"You know you won't be able to do that during the exams, right?"

George turns his head quickly to the source of the low-pitched voice coming from beside him. He smiles when he reconciles it with his friend, Wilbur. Having shared a particular love for lack of social interaction in the first year, they had soon become friends; it's just a pity that Wilbur doesn't take his course too.

He sighs loudly before he begins to comment, having been subjected to the other man's light jabs at his newfound hobby of doodling on his arms the past couple of days. But his words catch on his lip when he fully processes them.

Oh.

Universities, schools and the like obviously do not allow candidates to take examinations with marks and writing on their arms, whether they're from a soulmate or not. George can vividly recall some of his friends complaining about it in the past, but, obviously, he's never been too bothered about it before, until now.

He hasn't considered it at all.

He looks up at Wilbur as he takes the seat opposite him, merely opening up his laptop and not giving any further comment other than a knowing raised eyebrow. George shrinks away under them, caught, before uttering out a brief and unconvincing, "Pfft, yeah. Of course."

He doesn't really know why he tries to cover up his realisation, however, as he knows Wilbur has suffered the same problem since having found his soulmate about a year ago. They had been late bloomers together in finding their other halves until then, but George is still grateful for the company he had in his misery for at least a year or so.

Wilbur chucks his earphones in, after quickly looking back to George to check that he's all good; he just gives him a small nod and smile, allowing his friend to start his work, remaining entrenched in thought. He plays with the black biro he's taken to carrying around in his pocket (he checks its presence almost as often as his phone) and taps its spindly body against the oak wood of the table.

He'll have to wait until later to tell Clay, of course, as he's a bit off the radar now. His mind flicks back to earlier in the day as his eyes roam over the dotted hearts and faces he had spread across his and Clay's arms when he had seen the opportunity to tease him. It felt good to know that Clay was blushing and smiling because of him; he can now see why his soulmate likes doing it to him so much too.

George has an engrained image of what Clay looks like in his mind by now. He finds it comforting, imagining the different things his soulmate pens on his skin coming out of pink and bitten lips, framed by freckles and sun-kissed skin, in a low and melodic tone. That's one thing George

certainly can't get off of his mind; Clay's *voice*.

Going by his reactions to the things his soulmate merely writes to him, he dreads to think of what he will make himself and Clay feel when he finally hears sound coming from his soulmate's lips.

Abruptly, he halts the tapping of his pen against the table when he realises it's been steadily increasing into the territory of 'too loud'.

With a sheepish glance to Wilbur, who had apparently also been watching him immersed in his train of thought, George ducks his head back into the textbook, eager to finally escape back to the safety of his dorm where thoughts of Clay can be processed both thoroughly and alone.

George is thankfully just about finished wading knee-deep in code in the comfort of his room when he receives the next message on his skin. He can practically feel Clay's adrenaline brushing through him before the sentence is even complete and he's already grinning ecstatically for him.

WE WON!

Clay doesn't stop there with his administrations, however, continuing to draw several more smiley faces and exclamation marks around his words that cause George to stifle a giggle.

Yayyyy! Congrats :)

He says, hastily logging out of his computer to flop himself down on his bed, eagerly engulfing himself in the warmth of his sheets. A couple minutes pass as he catches himself staring at the ceiling, counting the perforated dots as he tries to calm his racing heart. It doesn't really work, so George reasons it must be more Clay than himself.

Wait, His soulmate has written when he goes to look at his arm again, Check your phone, I'm gonna send you something.

George smiles and feels his face light up. Without a second to waste, he leans to grab his phone from the edge of his beside table and unlocks it quickly with shaky fingers: it's a video.

Oh? He writes quickly, What's this?

Feeling what he has come to know as a mixture of pride and happiness, George looks across to his left arm to see Clay's message appear.

The winning score, of course ;)

George feels his eyes roll; of course his soulmate would be absolutely perfect at everything. He can't deny how proud he feels of him too, grinning widely with his teeth as he hits 'play' on the attachment Clay has sent.

The video is vertically filmed and shaky but still perfectly viable. George has to quickly adjust his volume settings as a loud boom of excited shouts and cries bursts out of his speakers, causing him to wince lightly.

It displays the bright green (George can hardly tell, however) of a large pitch with tall metal posts situated at either end, of which George can vaguely recognise as American football posts. There's further coloured markings situated along the pitch, carrying on out of frame; the video itself is filmed from the stands, quite obviously, hence the energetic noise from the crowd.

George soon recognises with not much surprise that American high school seems to be *exactly* like they portray it in the movies: loud, overwhelming and carrying a particularly strange emphasis on the importance of sport. He can't help but muse to himself how different English secondary school is in comparison, not to mention college or sixth form.

Shaking himself out of his tangent of thought, George soon returns his full attention to the video, winding it back to the start. Listening more carefully, he can hear the loud-pitched scream and whoops of the person taking the video. The camera is centred on what George can just about make out to be player number seven on the pitch, donning an emerald green uniform with a white trim. His brain makes the connection soon enough and he takes a light gasp.

Clay.

That's *him*. That's his soulmate. That's *Clay*. Number seven.

Even squinting particularly hard, George is unable to make out anything more than the fact that Clay is *tall* tall, like, he was definitely not kidding when he said he was 6' 3".

He revels in the knowledge that he's knows there's a dirty-blond head of hair sitting underneath that helmet, however, and freckled, sun-tanned cheeks. He's so distracted, yet again, that he rewinds the video back to the start once more, watching Clay run as the ball cuts through the air before landing cleanly in his arms. George desperately tries to ignore their toned nature for now; that's something to dwell on later...

There's an eruption of even louder cries and cheers from the crowd as Clay launches a powerful throw across the pitch, landing directly on top of the number eight, who rapidly launches it over the line after side-stepping two of the other team's players nimbly.

George's face launches into a grin feeding off of the sheer electric energy of the crowd alone. There's screams of 'Yes!' and 'Oh my God!' repeatedly coming from the camera holder, George finds himself laughing with them as he sees Clay run over to launch a massive bear hug around the number eight.

"Wow," The voice behind the camera comments again, George can almost picture them shaking their head in disbelief, "That's one you're gonna want George to see."

He freezes with his eyebrows raised at the casual mention of his name, heart rate soon shooting up high at the realisation that people in Clay's life already consider *him* a part of it. George races to text his soulmate back.

oh wow... that was, George begins, hovering his fingers over ether buttons on his keyboard to spell out 'hot' but soon backing out and finishing with, *amazing*. instead, causing himself to blush at his bashfulness. Even after all this.

was that your sister in the background?

He asks next quickly, dragging his mind away from what he had truly wanted to say. George is pretty sure he's correct; he's heard a lot about Drista from Clay already. From what he's gathered, his soulmate really loves her a lot.

yes, unfortunately.

Clay replies, causing George to emit a light laugh and an even brighter smile as Clay humbly thanks him for his compliment.

who's number eight?

George suddenly has an urge to ask, having noticed his obvious closeness to Clay. He loves finding out new information about his soulmate and building it all into the mental image he stores in his mind, becoming clearer and clearer every day.

ah, that's my best friend, sapnap.

Referring back to the video again, George watches as the camera zooms in on their celebration. Number eight, or 'Sapnap', rips his helmet off as his teammates all excitedly crowd, shout and pat him on the back around Clay clinging to him. He's got light brown hair, a little darker than what George envisions Clay's to be, and the beginnings of a beard gracing his jaw. George smiles along with him as he watches him excitedly punch into the air, mouthing 'Come on!'

George marks his slight disappointment that Clay hadn't done something similar of the sort when celebrating, his helmet remaining on his head, blocking George from catching a glance of his soulmate for the first time. Apparently, Clay gets the wrong end of the stick.

aw, georgie. don't tell me you're jealous.

Feeling his face turn a beet-red, George purses his lips as he protests to the contrary.

no, no, no, wait

He huffs frustratedly as Clay doesn't feel convinced; reluctantly realising that he's going to have to explain.

i- , He starts typing, half groaning in embarrassment into his other hand as he continues, i was just wishing i could've seen your face too...

There's a lack of reply for a good while; George tries to wait patiently, but it doesn't really work. Then, there's a familiarly warm and comforting sensation blanketing his whole body again and he lets out a relieved laugh and displays a partly triumphant smile.

Clay's *blushing*.

George tells him he reckons so over text and receives a rapid reply in return.

i'm not...

George sends his uncertainty at that fact down the bond, Clay soon changes his tune.

okay, fine. maybe i did... a bit.

but it's perfectly justified, i mean, you can't just say things like THAT to me.

Fuck, George thinks, now he's blushing again. It's a never-ending cycle that always seems to finish landing with him; his soulmate has that kind of effect, apparently, but George wouldn't have it any other way.

god, you don't have to feel so pleased with yourself about it too...

Clay types. George can hear the teasing lull in his tone, causing him to smirk slightly.

so what if i am?

He slows his movements a bit after hitting send on his message, the conversation teetering on a thin line that George doesn't know if the other is quite ready to cross yet.

... okay, not gonna lie. that's kind of hot.

George stares at the message he receives from Clay for about ten seconds before he's fully processed it. Alright, never mind. He's already leaped over the line instead. George is one hundred and ten percent sure that he is currently malfunctioning.

awww, Clay starts, who's flustered nowww?

He doesn't even attempt to protest, because he knows Clay can feel the redness of his cheeks and the butterflies lightly tickling his insides.

you're an idiot.

Sighing defeatedly and emitting a breathy laugh, he shakes his head into his free hand and habitually rubs at his eyes. Clay's delight and triumph soon bumps up against his heart. He receives a smiley face in return and George just lowers himself back down onto the comfort of his bed, stretching out into each far corner even though his feet don't even reach the ends.

Closing his eyes tightly, he immerses himself in the warmth blooming within him; today was a good day.

~

Hastily, George flits his eyes between the too-bright light of his computer screen and the messy scrawl of his handwriting on the cheap notepad in front of him, his pen dancing rapidly across the page.

He's *finally* finished with all of his class work and lectures for the day; he has no idea why he apparently likes to also torture himself with coding in his spare time too.

Okay. That's a lie. George loves the process of problem solving and eventually reaching a rewarding conclusion a lot, even if the middle part makes him want to curse the creation of technology in the first place.

Today he's coding random plugins for Minecraft, just stupid little changes that he and his friends like to try out and mess around on. It's good fun (when it actually works), but George has been stuck on figuring out what's missing from his commands for about an hour now and it's driving him completely *crazy*.

Checking the web quickly for answers, he takes his pen to hand again and scribbles down a few possible solutions he could try despite doubting their success. He reopens his tab with his code, eyes delving scrutinisingly back in, and it's not until black letters appear on his left forearm that he looks down to realise what he's done.

He's scrawled the possible fixes to his code he'd just collected from the web onto the pale inside of his right arm, barely legible. It's something he's all too used to doing, using his skin as a notebook of sorts for things he needs to remember or look for quickly, because he'd always thought there was no one to receive his messy words on the other side. George had apparently done it once again

out of habit, moving for his arm instead of the paper in front of him.

Pausing for a second, George processes and soon moves quickly to wipe it off and shoot an apology to Clay. It is still very early in the day, so neither of their arms are very filled at all; George has gotten used to keeping his side neat, normally. However, he halts his movements when he actually reads what his soulmate has written.

You code Minecraft?

George freezes, waiting for the teasing comment. That's what normally happens. Instead, he can feel Clay become very focused with what he's lining up to write next on his arm.

Btw, you need another set of brackets around the last command otherwise it won't run properly.

His eyes widen and he takes a hold of his bitten bottom lip with his teeth as he processes the current situation. There's *no way* Clay just fixed his entire code by looking at a small section of it once... right?

Moving quickly, George amends his code to fit Clay's suggestion, makes it run and... oh wow. It runs perfectly smoothly, no mistakes.

Uh, thanks?

He writes, brain still apparently trying to catch up. Information overload.

How did you know to-

I code Minecraft sometimes too! I've been learning since I was like 13 lol.

Oh, right. Well, that explains it, George thinks to himself, licking his tongue over his lips as they dry.

I've impressed you, haven't I?

George rolls his eyes a little as he reads the words, knowing Clay simply wants a verbal confirmation because he can *definitely* tell most of what George is feeling by now.

Yes... that's been bugging me for ages actually.

You're welcome then :)

He's halfway through forming what to say next in his mind when he feels a slight itch crawling across the back of his neck and up and down his spine. Pondering over it for a bit, George finally decides on... hesitation?

Intrigued, he simply sits and waits for Clay to either say what he wants or to steer their conversation in a completely different way. George's leg bounces up and down against his chair as he rests the lid of the pen against his mouth.

So caught up in his thoughts of trying to hazard a guess as to just what it is that Clay clearly does or doesn't want to say, George suddenly realises that ink has been appearing on his skin over and over, repeatedly, for a while now. Little clusters of illegible beginnings of words that Clay seems to not be able to say in just the right way.

When a tingling sensation hits his heart more prominently, George recognises that there's a hint of anxiety mixed in there too. He tries his best to stay calm himself, as to not make it worse for the

other than it apparently already is.

George is watching carefully the next time words appear on his skin, *If you want,*

He's still holding his breath slightly, only barely-there puffs of air escaping from his partially closed and chapped lips.

and it's definitely totally fine if you don't...

I could help you try out the code and we could vc or something?

All the air finally escapes from his body at his reading of those last few words.

Voice chat? With Clay? Actually *hear* the blushing complements he gives George first hand and the probably loud and wheezy laugh that accompanies his stupid jokes?

George thinks he might actually be on the brink of passing out. However, still very much feeling the weight of Clay's anxiousness pressing against his chest, he makes himself grip his pen more firmly, put it to his arm, and reply back as quickly as he can.

Yes.

...okay, admittedly, maybe it was a mistake not to think that much further past this point but at least George has got the first thing that had immediately popped into his head at the suggestion down on his skin. Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes.

But, it's entirely worth it to feel the sheer elation welling within Clay at his answer; he smiles even wider against the palm of his hand where his arm is balanced on the edge of his desk.

Discord?

Clay asks in small letters against their left wrist, the darkness of the ink starkly standing out against his pale skin. George quickly replies with a 'yes' and his username, to which his soulmate tells him to wait a second whilst he starts up his computer. Meanwhile, his poor heart is making rapid attempts to escape his chest and just about fly away into the sky with how fast it's beating.

The chime of the Discord notification from his computer almost sends him flying off of his seat as he nervously waits, playing with his own fingers in his lap and staring absently at his screen.

George can't believe this is finally happening. His *soulmate*. He's going to hear his *soulmate's* voice for the first time. Something he was beginning to think he'd truly never get.

Dream has added you as a friend!

It suddenly feels even more real and he has to give himself another minute to fully catch up with the world.

Dream?

He asks Clay by penning it across the skin of his right arm, amused at his cute username that George somehow already thinks fits him so well. He can feel Clay's light embarrassment as he replies.

Oh, I forgot about that...

It's my gamer tag. Sapnap and I came up with them ages ago.

George laughs lightly under his breath, feeling triumphant whenever Clay is the one who's more shy about something, because he never is.

Aw, He starts, never one to pass up an opportunity to tease (and maybe also in a subconscious attempt to distract himself from the rapid beating of his heart), *don't worry, I think it's cute,*

He waits a couple of seconds for maximum dramatic effect, revelling in the warmth enclosing his chest for the two of them, before finishing with, *Dream* ♡.

George snickers a loud laugh when he can practically feel Clay's break of composure. He hovers his pen over his wrist again, ready to write back, but his soulmate's next message never comes because instead the loud chime of an incoming Discord call reverberates around his room.

His stomach drops, excitedly and anxiously, as he grabs his headphones, checks the mic is on and pulls up his Minecraft and coding tabs again.

With three thumping beats of his heavy heart, George clicks 'Accept Call.' If he thinks about it too much they'd never get anywhere at all.

Hearing the distinct click and seeing the visual confirmation that his and Clay's call was indeed now connected, George waits patiently, not really knowing what to say first himself and finding his mouth parched and drier than ever. He licks his tongue swiftly over his lips in an attempt to help.

"...George?"

And there it is. The sound of Clay's *voice*. It does so much more to George than he previously could have possibly imagined; the tone and pitch is low, but even in the way that he carries the singular syllable of George's name in his mouth, George can tell that he could listen to Clay just simply speak to him for *days*.

It has this kind of hypnotising high lilt that he's sure sounds absolutely beautiful when wrapped melodically around a carefree laugh, and probably near-fatal for poor George if Clay were to complement him in that tone.

His mind is whirring so quickly, cogs ticking against the clock, that it takes him a moment to remember that he's supposed to answer back.

"Clay..."

He simply breathes, unable to find himself capable of saying anything much else and cursing the way his words almost catch in his throat, choked.

There's a couple of seconds of silence and George can feel the darkness of worry starting to shade over him, but the clouds are soon dispersed at the sound of a relieved sigh being emitted from Clay's lips.

"...You have no idea how happy I am to finally be able to hear you."

His soulmate tells him this in a voice that's so giddy it literally allows George to be able to hear his smile, tinged with breathless laughter. A beaming grin spreads itself across his face of its own accord and his heart also starts to beat faster as he listens to Clay's light yet deep tone... is it normal to be attracted to someone's *voice*?

"Me too."

George manages to say, louder than he had spoken before, because he is. He really, really is. All the imagined scenarios he had previously dreamt up immediately falling away at this moment, leaving him with everything that's now finally and blindingly real.

The grip he has on his mouse is ridiculously tight and also increasingly sweaty; he forces himself to try and calm down at least a little bit.

"I like the way you say my name."

Clay tells him, so sincerely that a lump has caught in his throat that he's forced to cough away.

"Which one?" George jokes, still not over his soulmate's perfectly fitting alternative title, "*Dream*?"

This incites the most wonderful laugh out of Clay, hearty and wheezy and close enough to how George had imagined it would be that it spreads pleasant tingles down his spine and into his fingers.

"Both of them," His soulmate replies, out of breath from his laugh, as George's limbs suddenly start responding to his brain again and he's able to invite Clay to join his server, "I don't mind which you call me, by the way. Lots of people I play with just use 'Dream' out of habit."

George giggles a little, hands slipping over his keyboard as the world loads up for them both. After a moment he replies, "I think I'll stick with 'Clay'."

Thinking about it, he'd soon found that his soulmate's name has very quickly, in such little time, gained so much significance to him. The name of someone he's been waiting and looking for for three years isn't a name he ever wants to forget. So, he sticks with 'Clay'.

The other tells him that's okay, and George can't help but hear the tinge of giddiness in his voice; perhaps Clay deducted his reasons for doing so. Either that or his emotions are overflowing again.

"What sort of plug-in were you working on, by the way?"

The other soon asks after the new seed he generates loads, landing them in the middle of a plains biome. Suddenly feeling mischievous, George tells him to try and work it out for himself, to which Clay challengingly accepts, just as George thought he would having recognised his determined disposition from the very beginning.

However, it doesn't take him too long to find out as George withholds his light snickers from flowing down his mic, watching Clay's green avatar walk one block forward and promptly die.

"Wait, WHAT."

Clay exclaims incredulously, making George's laughs suddenly escape happily and freely. There's a light feeling in his chest bubbling upwards that lands a pleasant shimmer across his upper body. Soon, he can hear Clay laughing with him too as he tries to move and dies once again.

"Wait- wait," His soulmate's words are interjected with loud wheezes from the other. His volume drastically increases as he tries and dies once again, "*GEORGE*."

George only stays still in game, having to clutch his poor chest in real life in an attempt to stop his laughs that have soon launched into near cackles. He takes a shaky breath in as his heart pounds wildly once more at the way his name sounds falling out of Clay's mouth, even if it is shouted in frustration.

“What?” He asks faux naively, glee clear in his tone, feigning ignorance and turning away from his soulmate’s struggle in game.

“Georgeeeeeee.”

Clay whines out, refusing to move this time and shifting carefully on the block he stands. George can’t help but think about how cute that sounds, and makes himself chuckle a bit harder by imagining his soulmate with a pout on his face to accompany his complaint.

“What did you do?”

His soulmate finally settles on asking, sounding defeated but not willing to admit it in any way. George smiles to himself as he digs the dirt block below him, collects it and replaces the block beside him with it before walking forward and successfully not dying.

Receiving a couple moments of silence from Clay, George grins to himself again before he begins to explain.

“We can’t touch any blocks that we haven’t placed,” He trails off his words with a tint of laughter, Clay’s struggle coming to mind once again, “Basically, we can’t touch the ground...”

Waiting for a couple of seconds and still not receiving any input from Clay, George’s brows quickly furrow and he pulls up the Discord again. Relief floods through him: still connected.

“...Clay?”

“You have a beautiful laugh.”

In his defence, George is caught exceptionally off-guard by this comment that comes flying in through his headset and electrifying the depths of his heart, sparks flying everywhere.

The noise that escapes his mouth is either that of a gasp or a stifled cough, he can’t really tell, but both have him looking away from his Minecraft screen and at Clay’s Discord profile, as if he can actually see him. If he could actually see him right now, his reaction would *definitely* be a hundred times worse. His skin is already becoming painted an all too familiar shade of crimson red.

George curses in his mind as he knows Clay definitely feels this change through the small trail of light chuckles that follow his comment. He makes a retaliating decision very quickly.

“You’re just saying that to distract me from the fact that you couldn’t figure it out.”

He says defiantly, purposely appealing to Clay’s competitive side in a desperate attempt to distract from his own current strife. Even though Clay *does* immediately start protesting that that was not the case at all, George can still feel the knowing, satisfied and content feeling swelling in his chest; Clay’s *pride* at having had such an effect on him.

They soon begin attempting the challenge for real, to test out all the features of George’s meticulous code, and it takes a stupid spider knocking him off his block and onto the floor, instantly killing him, for him to notice newly penned black ink on the inside of his left arm.

I really did mean it.

Your laugh is adorable.

His breath catches in his throat once again and he feeling another looming blush creeping over him

yet again.

George can't even stop the reflexive defence that bubbles straight out of him, shrouded in bashful laughs, "You're so dumb."

He hears a light exhale through his headset immediately after and knows Clay has realised he has seen his words. Diligently, George begins to parkour his way back over to where his soulmate is patiently waiting for him in game, at the end of the trail of blocks they've been leaving in an attempt to reach the village on the horizon.

"What did I do?"

The younger asks indifferently, although George is entirely aware that he knows what he did, and he *certainly* knows it's causing him to flush even harder now, going by the teasing and tickling feeling against his chest.

"You — You said," George only elevates his heart rate drastically faster as he approaches the prospect of repeating Clay's words out loud. He accepts defeat with a sigh, "Never mind."

Clay's gleeful snicker is entirely worth it. So is the feeling of retribution as George approaches the block Clay is positioned on and hits him cleanly off with his fist. ("*GEORGE!*")

Chest physically aching from laughing so hard in such a small amount of time, George can't help but think that this is probably the happiest he's been in the past year. And it seems so stupid to him, in a way, for it to be *this* moment in particular, when he's playing a freaking block game with his soulmate, but his heart has literally never felt so warm and light. Never in his life, and it's a feeling he never wants to slip away.

They start doing pretty well, having finally collected the food from the village and established a truce on hitting each other purposefully onto the floor. George's next trouble starts when he pushes on ahead of Clay, suddenly breezed with confidence, and he jumps boldly further down into the mineshaft they are currently in, careful to place blocks as he goes.

"Pfft, George, hold up a second. I'm still crafting us tools."

"I'm just checking the chests, I'll be quick, don't worry."

Clay lets him go, but not without a joking disapproving tut, to which George just emits a careless laugh. Spying a chest, he nimbly manoeuvres his way over before opening it.

"Aha!" He exclaims cheerfully, taking the iron chest plate he'd found in there and placing it onto himself.

"*"Suit up?"*" Clay reads from the chat, "Nice."

"See, I told you it'd be fine," George tells him with a hint of cockiness, although not really caring all to much now, "Look there's more bread too, some iron and a — AHHH!"

George's excitement gets abruptly cut off by a creeper jumping down on top of him from a cave he hadn't spotted. Very narrowly, he luckily manages to use one of the shields Clay had insisted they made after finding two pieces of iron in the village. He survives the explosion with half of his health.

Hearing Clay emit a short snicker, George is about to confront him teasingly for his lack of sympathy when two skeletons soon jump him from the very same place, causing him to jolt out of

his skin.

“AHHH,” He shouts, suddenly uncaring of his level of noise, fully focused on holding his shield up and staying shifted on the one safe block he has already placed, “Clay? CLAY! Help... please? HELP ME, PLEASE?!”

All he can do is stand helplessly as the relentless barrage of arrows thump threateningly against his shield. His hand is slipping on his mouse and keys.

“CLAYYYYY.”

He tries again as his finger accidentally slides off of his key and he gets hit by one singular arrow, driving him down to one and a half hearts, until his shield is firmly held up again.

“Wait, wait. George, I’m coming, I’m coming,” His soulmate tells him quickly, voice quite high and rather alarmed, probably due to the abnormally fast pace of George’s heart right now. Although, his words don’t do much to alleviate George’s pitiful whimpers, “Where are you?”

“I’m down HERE,” George exclaims, adrenaline still attacking every inch of his body, huddled against the wall of the cave, “Please, please, please help me — AH.”

He has to reposition his hold on his mouse again, he’s still pinned against the wall, breaths emitted hurriedly.

Nothing can describe his relief upon seeing Clay charging in shouting wildly, “Get away from him!” whilst MLG blocking underneath him and killing both skeletons in two clean sweeps of his sword.

Poor George is still both physically and mentally recovering when Clay asks, “You okay...? George?”

“Now I am.” He answers meekly, to which his soulmate lets out a relieved string of laughs. Apparently, his face still has the power to produce a small smile at his sentiment.

“My knight in shining armour,” He jokes with a melodic tone as he eats in game in an attempt to re-generate his health. Without even asking, Clay drops him some steak, “*Sir Dream.*”

He hears his soulmate emit out a cute breath of a laugh at his words and it makes him smile.

“Anything for you, *your Majesty.*”

Clay chimes back, sarcasm lacing his voice. Although George gets the impression that he quite likes the title, judging by the breathless and fuzzy feeling swirling around in his chest. He makes sure to tuck that little piece of information away somewhere for later.

The final straw for them both with this challenge is when Clay is so focused on creating the nether portal that he walks backwards all too quickly onto a block they are yet to replace, instantly killing him and throwing half of his possessions into the lava pool around them.

“Oh, *fuck.*”

Is all his soulmate says as he presumably respawns hundreds of blocks away, causing George only to hysterically laugh until tears begin to form in the corners of his eyes.

“That looks like it’s pretty much it for us then.”

He manages to finally say as his giggles die down and he just launches his own avatar into the lava before him, quickly burning him to death and receiving him a huffed laugh from Clay as he reappears beside him at the spawn point.

“At least the code works?”

Clay supplies in a hesitant voice, causing George to burst out laughing once again. He could really get used to the tiny explosions that seem to enact inside of Clay every time he succeeds in making him laugh; it’s lovely to feel.

For the first time in a while, George checks the time on his computer as he leans back in his chair, letting his back click and giving his aching arms a stretch up into the air and towards his ceiling.

“Woahhhh, two hours? We lasted a pretty long time. I’d say we did well.”

He only gets a hum of agreement from Clay and not much else, which he doesn’t quite understand as the other man had been so talkative and expressive until now, but he soon finds out why.

“Oh, uh, it’s okay. You can leave if you want... that really did take a while.”

Clay attempts to draw out the last word into a laugh, but George can immediately tell it doesn’t fill his lungs entirely, like his absurdly loud wheezes normally do. This and his soulmate’s melancholic tone absolutely crush his rapidly beating heart as it pounds loudly against his chest. Clay thinks he wants to *leave*...

Leave *him*.

“No, no, no. Clay...” Begins George, already regretting not having planned out the rest of his response as he feels Clay’s anticipation swelling inside his chest, “I’d really like to just... stay on the call. O-only if you want to as well, of course.”

He curses his stuttering, but is distracted soon after as his soulmate’s emotions elevate through the roof once again, sending George’s poor heart on an all-time high.

“Of course I want to stay with you.”

Clay tells him sincerely, smile clearly reappearing in his tone of voice, and causing George’s toothy grin to show, stretching ear-to-ear.

“Okay,” He agrees giddily, warm sensations spreading in the depths of his chest, “Just wait a second, I’m going to get comfy.”

His soulmate just laughs and agrees to do the same, saying he’ll settle down in his bed; George can hear a rustle of sheets through his headset as he shuts down his computer and transfers the Discord call over to his phone.

Soon after, he settles himself under the covers of his thin duvet, bringing his knees up to huddle against himself, self-regulating warmth. If Clay were here he’d have a warm body to wrap his arms around, but that’s sadly not the case. For now, the warmth his voice alone provides will have to do.

They talk idly for around another half an hour, George belatedly wonders if Clay is actually meant to be doing something today other than just talking to him, but he doesn’t want to bring it up because he doesn’t want this to end.

“Are they soon then?”

Clay asks interestedly as the topic shifts over to George's upcoming exams. George shifts his head on his pillow, lying himself down sideways, staring at the Discord logo displayed on his phone as if he could actually gaze into his soulmate's eyes right now.

If he did, he wonders what he would see; Clay had mentioned previously that his eyes are green. George can't see green very well, which is a fact about himself he will probably be forever angry about now, unable to observe what he's sure is probably the most beautiful emerald tint of his eyes as they'd study the features of his own face. Heads close together and breath intermingling, George would take the opportunity to dart down his gaze to Clay's lips and —

“George?”

God, he's blushing all shades of red and pink again. And this time it was *his own* fault. He's thinking way too hard, way too much. God. He hopes Clay can't decipher the longing that has so suddenly come over him.

To touch. To hold. George wants to be wherever Clay is.

It's never felt so hard to be apart before.

Wilbur's words echo in the back depths of his mind. He says them out loud as they threaten to fight their way out of his mouth.

“Next week,” He breathes out shakily. Clay doesn't respond, waiting probably, upon feeling his soulmate struggle, “We- uh, won't be able to talk to each other... on our arms. It's full exam conditions.”

“...oh.”

Is all Clay responds with, followed by a brief period of silence in which he appears to process this information and George's feelings about it.

“Well, that's fine...” The other begins in a carefully calculated reassuring tone that actually does bring his racing heart down a little, “Well, no. Obviously it's not *fine*...”

He sounds almost angry with the idea as he draws the latter part out quickly to correct himself, as if it offends him.

“But, I'll be sure to text you everyday, just like how writing to you is the first thing I do when I wake up.”

His admission has George's heartbeat going funny again, sensations that rock him like a coastal wave.

“And... we can call. If you want?”

The final part of Clay's suggestion turns into more a question towards the end and his tone dips more quietly, as if he doesn't really know if George will say yes. Which is ridiculous, because George will always say yes when it comes to Clay.

“I'd like that.” He admits through an unstable breath.

Hearing the short sigh of relief and a slight chuckle from Clay, a smile starts making its way back across the planes of his cheeks. This has happened so much today that George thinks it's a wonder they don't ache.

“Oh — wait a second.”

Clay requests suddenly after nearly causing George to jump out of his skin with his exclamation and the sparks of excitement that seem to rejuvenate his relaxed body. He tells him so, to which his soulmate only laughs a quick apology.

“I-,” Clay pauses in his speech and George can hear rustling and rattling in the background of their call, which has now been going for three and a half hours, mind you, not that it feels like anything close to that for George, “Ah, there they are. I went shopping the other day and bought every blue pen I could find,”

George huffs a confused, but appreciative laugh as Clay seems to illustrate his point (rather literally) by drawing a neat line on their left wrist that George can tell is an ocean dark blue.

“You can tell me which one you like best?”

The younger man poses it as a question, but George can already feel that he’s so damn proud with himself that it makes an disbelieving laugh bubble out of him.

The warm and comforting feeling never leaves his chest as he sleepily watches Clay doodle across their arms, leaving small hearts, stars and smiley faces as he insists on hearing George’s every opinion on each pen’s colour. If he just stares at his arms and listens, he can almost fool himself into believing that Clay’s right here beside him, within touching distance. Real.

He falls asleep that night, still on the call with Clay, lulled into sleep by the comfort his presence brings. He wakes in the morning to a message carefully penned in various shades of blue that sends a familiar sensation wrapping itself around his chest.

sweet dreams, georgie <3.

see you tomorrow.

~

Bursting through the door to his dorm, George rushes rapidly to grasp the pen placed especially on his desk.

Can I call you?

I have something I want to say.

He pens neatly across the top of his right arm, visible. It’s evening for him, so he knows Clay’s out of school.

Sure enough, he immediately feels the threads of anxiety weaving in between each of his bones. His heart warms with sympathy for the other as he apologises for probably racing into what he has to say all too quickly, but the adrenaline in his veins is urging him forwards and he doesn’t have the ability to restrain himself right now.

Nothing bad. Promise.

Without even communicating, George can feel the relief seep across his soulmate’s body, and he

wonders what Clay even thought he was going to say, but he pushes those thoughts away for later as he receives an incoming phone call. Clay.

“Hey, what’s up?”

George can’t help but grin stupidly every time he hears his soulmate’s voice now. Steadfast and reassuring, it’s the only thing he needs to hear to calm him down, particularly after a stressful day.

He gets so swept up in his thoughts that he almost forgets what he had rushed into his room to say to him, but a prompt from the other soon reminds him.

“So,” George tries to start, completely out of breath from a mixture of running up the stairs to his dorm and the fast pace of his heart and lungs, “I’d — um, forgotten about this thing that’s happening because, well, I’ve been distracted by-“

“Me?” Clay interjects cheekily when he sees the opportunity, feeling openly proud of himself as George splutters with the rest of his words.

“... *stuff*.”

He finishes both stubbornly and ambiguously, making Clay laugh even more. His soulmate’s teasing nature and wonderful laugh certainly aren’t helping his scenario right now, the words desperately wanting to spring from his lips, but George makes himself take a couple of shallow breaths before he attempts to speak again, hearing Clay’s laughs finally lull.

“I- um,”

Oh God. He was so excited, practically sprinting back to his room from his meeting with his course director, that he didn’t even think about how nerve-racking this entire conversation is definitely going to be.

“Okay, so. Um,” He starts again, feeling thankful when Clay waits patiently to let him speak and a reassuring warmth engulfs his body, “On my university course, there’s this option, right? That I could, uh, choose to do. And the first meeting about it was like a whole month ago so I haven’t really heard much about it since, but I had another conversation with the director about it today and well, uh...”

He loses his place, getting too distracted by the interesting concoction of emotions swirling around in the centre of his chest.

“It’s an exchange program.”

George finally manages to utter out, moving on to his main point and letting a little bit of the weight in his shoulders fall. He’s staring out of the window as he talks to Clay on the phone, watching the orange sun dip brightly into a sea of red where it’s just about to disappear from the sky.

As Clay processes his words, George can feel the rising of something hopeful filling his stomach, lungs and eventually his heart, which has already made a massive leap in pace since opening his mouth.

Continuing on with his words carefully, voice stooping lower and lower, George flexes the grip his has around his phone.

“One of the other universities mine is partnered with is in the US...” A hesitant smile peeks onto

his face before he can even finish, “in Florida.”

Expectantly, George waits, still staring out of the window at the setting sun as he experiences Clay’s inward rush of emotions. Each new one that appears feels like he’s being swept off of his feet, like a sudden rush of wind that rushes through his entire body, both thrilling and exhilarating him.

It’s mesmerising and terrifying for George to experience second-hand. He’s very glad when Clay speaks, a tempest still crawling within them.

“Wait, *what?*”

George’s cheeks are stained red as he knows he’s the one who has to draw out the connection and make the suggestion.

“I- We don’t have to meet if you don’t want to, o- of course. I totally get it and I’ll be fine either way. But I-,” He forces himself to slow down, taking a deep breath to halt his anxious rambling. He clears his throat.

“I just wanted you to know that, uh, I’ll be there... in Florida. In about a month.”

The evening sun beams dazzlingly into his room, painting oranges and yellow swimmingly across his floor. George would quite like the ground to swallow him up, biting down harshly on the fat of his lip and scrunching up his eyes as he nervously awaits his soulmate’s reply.

“...Are you *kidding me?*”

Comes Clay’s reaction, loud and exclaimed. George’s brow frowns a little, unsure of what his reaction means.

“No, I -“

“*Of course* I want to see you,” Clay tells him in an exasperated tone down the phone. All breath has escaped George’s body; he inhales sharply.

“George, I literally want to see you *so*, so bad,” Clay breaths out almost shakily, as though restraining himself, “More than anything in the world.”

Harsh breaths have to be taken by George again before he can find himself about to speak. Every inch of his skin is electrified, burning up pleasantly into warm embers.

“... really?”

His soulmate emits a heavy sigh, as though he believes he could never make George understand just how much.

“*Really*, really.”

He finally settles on promising in a half-whisper, in which George can hear both his sincerity and blooming grin.

Shifting his phone against his ear, George’s own smile takes over his entire face, scrunching up his eyes neatly and causing his cheeks to finally ache, as well as blush a deep rose-red.

Out of the window, the sun finally plunges itself into darkness, vanishing across the horizon and giving way to the brilliant moon. It’s funny to George to think that he and Clay see the same sky,

yet are positioned so endlessly and cruelly far from each other.

Not for long, he thinks to himself as he finally releases a relieved gasp of breath down the phone, earning himself a precious wheeze from his soulmate.

Not too long at all.

Chapter End Notes

seriously, thank you so, so much for all the support on this fic and all the lovely comments on the last chapter especially :) i love you all!!!

the sun

Chapter Summary

George and Clay finally meet in person for the first time.

Chapter Notes

heyyyy

this chapter is longer than the last!! all i will say is that there's A LOT that occurs in this part... you will have to read on to see hehe <3

enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Sapnap,”

Clay begins, lying himself fully horizontal and spreading out his limbs, taking up a large proportion of the couch the two are currently sharing. Sapnap pushes his legs away from him and onto the floor, causing Clay to fall halfway off and shoot him a firm furrow of his brow.

“What am I going to *do*?”

Finishing his words with a low whine and burying his head into the plush cushions of his friend's couch, he emits a muffled groan. The other man just gives him a brief hum of consideration before he's swearing loudly again at the game he's currently attempting to play without letting Clay distract him.

“Dude,” Sapnap says, unimpressed, “You made me die again.”

Clay rolls his eyes and laughs as he turns on the sofa and gives his friend a playful push with his foot.

“No, that's just because you suck.”

He quips back with a sarcastic grin that shows his teeth and causes him to be shoved partly off of the couch again as he grips onto the arm for dear life, laughing gleefully.

“Nuh-uh,” The other protests, placing his controller onto the coffee table in front of them that's still littered with left-over takeaway boxes, “It's 'cus you never play with me anymore. All you do is play Minecraft with George.”

Fighting the urge to sardonically roll his eyes again, Clay relents and leans forwards to collect another slice of pizza, although he's sure a smile manages to fight its way onto his face because when he looks back at Sapnap he's smirking.

Clay can't even argue with him because he's just... correct. Ever since learning of their shared interest in the game and of coding for it too, he and George have spent pretty much the past week or so in Discord calls, both hunched over masses and masses of code, each challenging the other to a more complex and absurd idea to code by the day.

Personally, his favourite part is getting to try them out for the first time with George and hearing his high-pitched cackled laugh as he inevitably teases Clay for being bad at the game or celebrates the success of his creation.

He really, really never thinks he'll ever be able to resist the beaming, fond smile that springs onto his face at the sound of George's voice alone. Scratch that. He doesn't think, he *knows*.

He also hasn't told George this but he could feel the effect *his* own voice had appeared to have on his soulmate when he called his name for the first time. Sparks had bombarded his chest, so overwhelmingly warm that Clay had thought he might just melt on the spot.

To him, hearing George's melodic voice had stunned him for a few seconds upon hearing it for the first time because the first word he all but gasped out was 'Clay'. *Clay*... his freaking name sounds so beautiful falling from his soulmate's lips. Lips Clay is sure are pink and burst into blotches of crimson-red when George bites them when he laughs or tries to unsuccessfully withhold a smile.

"What were you gonna say?"

Sapnap soon asks through a resigned sigh as he quits the game and sticks some sports on the TV in the back. His friend's words drag him back into reality, which Clay detests in at least some way because in *reality* George isn't right beside him. Isn't within reach.

"Oh..." It takes a few seconds for him to actually recall, "I was saying about how I don't know what I'm going to do! Like, how do I even —"

"God, not this again,"

Sapnap tuts loudly, shaking his head slowly and disbelievingly, as if he cannot physically comprehend his friend's current stupidity. He brings a slow hand up to run at his eyes before he leans back into the cushions of the couch and rolls his head over to look directly at Clay.

"You are literally going to be fine when you meet him. You two are already so sickeningly cute that I dread to even think about when you're actually together."

"But —"

"No, shut up. Literally you two are already so," Sapnap considers his word placement for a moment, Clay's watching him with regarding eyes, "... *close* and perfect for each other that even if you *do* do something stupid when you meet up,"

His friend takes a breath here, inclining his head towards Clay more dramatic effect.

"Which you inevitably will —"

"Hey!"

"I'm sure George will still be madly infatuated with you anyway."

Clay's green eyes watch those of his friend's carefully, frowning with his brow but thankful with a kind glint. He knows he's been subjecting Sapnap to these relentless rants and worries for the past

two days, but George has bought his *plane tickets* already.

And even though he doesn't actually fly out for another week or so, Clay can't seem to shake the dawning fact that this is a thing that's actually *happening*. That this is *real* and George will soon be a physical being he can touch and hold and speak to without having to ponder over the perfect description for the dark brown of his eyes or the pale pink of his lips.

Perhaps it's because this whole soulmate thing has always, and will definitely always, mean so much to him; he's placed so much pressure on himself that he really, really wants to get it perfectly right. First time, preferably. But he wants George to arrive in America, touch down onto the burning tarmac that's barely solid under the scorching Floridian sun, and feel immediately *loved*.

He wants his soulmate to feel his value and worth to Clay so much that it's unreal. Clay wants to wrap his arms securely around George's back and sigh contently into the straggly strands of his brown hair. He wants to collapse after a long school day right into his soulmate's arms and have sweet reassurance whispered to him first-hand and real, rather than down a crackling mic.

But for all of these things he must wait until next month, and Clay's never been one for patience. Anxieties and worries creep up on him by the day as the date marked clearly and excitedly in his calendar (*'pick up george from airport!!!!'*) draws nearer. Almost every situation in which something could possibly go wrong somehow manages to slide into his mind, and poor Sapnap seems to receive the brunt of his highly-imaginative hypotheticals.

Sapnap shoots him a knowing look as he snaps back from his stormy mind. It's laced with sympathy and worry from deep down, Clay knows his best friend cares about him immensely and wants him to be excited rather than anxious, but he can't help it.

The other seems to consider something for a moment, regarding Clay's ponderous expression for a little longer before proposing, "Minecraft?" with a hopeful grin, fully aware of the comfort the game tends to bring to Clay.

He grins solemnly but widely, ever-thankful to have such an amazing and understanding friend.

"Minecraft."

He agrees, kicking Sapnap's thigh again before suddenly racing off into his friend's room, well acquainted with the layout of the house. A playful and adrenaline-filled cackled laugh escapes Clay as he hears Sapnap thunder after him, racing him to his desk with protesting shouts of cheating.

Clay forgets his worries momentarily that evening, and the clear pink-blue sky that sets into his mind when he finally sleeps is relieving.

~

Clay tries desperately to conceal this type of thing from George over the next week, which of course, as he soon finds out, is entirely impossible due to the deep-seated running nature of their soul bond now. It's not that Clay wants to hide anything from George, per se; he'd just rather not add to his soulmate's stresses.

Why are you worried? :(

His soulmate adorably writes across his arm, front and centre so he's sure Clay will see, on one night in particular when his thoughts won't leave him alone. He's been staring at his blank monitor for a little too long at this point, lost in his spiralling thoughts about anything and everything that could go wrong when him and George meet up. There's also an understanding and open sensation enclosing around his heart, almost like the palm of another reaching to firmly grasp onto his hand.

I'm- He takes a second to pause before he finishes composing his reply to George on his skin, insistent on writing the truth, *I'm just thinking about our first meeting... and how it will be...*

Clay feels an unexpected, strange mix of emotions come from the other and frowns upon their appearance.

If you've changed your mind about it... it's completely fine. I understand.

Fuck, he's such an idiot. Suddenly it's like there's an unmovable heavy weight pressing down onto his chest, where his heart is trapped, rattling helplessly against its cage.

No, no. George, it's not that. DEFINITELY not that. I promise.

The pressure eases and Clay finally finds he's able to breathe again, taking in staggering breaths.

'Worried' is probably the wrong word...

He writes, rushing and uncaring about the state of his handwriting when George has experienced negative emotions because of *him* and his stupid inability not to over think.

More like, Clay takes a few seconds to ponder over whether he really wants to admit this right now, but he does, *...nervous.*

The beat in both their hearts softens immensely; Clay feels the warmth of care and concern rush down the bond and wrap his skin in a welcome embrace. He finds himself humming gratefully even though George can't hear.

So am I, George admits in small letters after a couple of seconds, making Clay laugh aloud to himself and his empty screens, *But I'm really excited too...*

Clay feels his hesitation to add the latter part and grins widely at his soulmate's undeniably cute demeanour.

I can't wait to- He stops himself abruptly here, unaware of how exactly he intends to finish his sentence.

He can't exactly tell George that every time he feels him blush he imagines the delectable shades of red blooming across his pale cheeks; that he wants to *touch* and *feel* the warmth generated underneath his skin. That he wants nothing more than to glance upon the pink of his soulmate's lips in the flesh and remark upon their need to be thoroughly and entirely kissed, to fall deliciously pliant and soft under the administrations of no one other than *him*.

He can't tell George that he spends lonely Floridian nights sweating and staring at the empty plane of the pillow beside him almost mocking him for the lack of a warm body cuddled up against him, or that the last thing he does before he goes to bed is try and memorise all of the messages George had written to him that day, treasuring them in the most important depths of his mind and storing them away.

He'll barely admit it to himself, but the ones he categorises as the most significant and ridiculously

cute become immortalised through the camera on his phone and are filed neatly under a folder named ‘♡’. Highlights include the first train of messages they had shared and the clutter of hearts and smiley faces George had penned all over him that one day. These are messages Clay never, ever wants to forget.

There’s a lot of things that Clay wants to say in this moment to complete his sentence, but in the end he writes, *I can’t wait to see you, George. I miss you so much.*

He feels laughter giggle upwards from his soulmate’s end; Clay smiles to himself like a maniac.

How can you miss me when we haven’t met yet?

I’ve been missing you for most of my life already, Clay pauses for a moment when he experiences the swooping action George’s heart takes, taking a sharp breath to balance himself before committing to his words, *I’m ready for that to be over pretty quickly.*

He receives a rushed reply, which adds to his unstoppable grin, *Me too.*

There’s a light and comfortable settling of emotions, finally, in his chest, and Clay breathes out evenly for the first time in a while.

Do you want to call?

George writes next on his arm. It takes him less than five seconds to take his soulmate up on his offer, grasping his phone tightly in his hand as the call connects.

“Hey.” George says simply, but that simple word levels something out in Clay. Balances the worries and the love battling in the chambers of his heart and pauses the pulses of electricity that have been berating his mind.

“Hi.”

Is all he can think to say breathlessly, still starstruck even after a couple of weeks that he gets to hear his soulmate speak aloud to him on a daily basis. Having been deprived of the opportunity for so long, George seems eager to fully indulge him too, which Clay is more than happy about.

Apparently, George picks up on his unbeatable enthusiasm, as he compares it to that of a Golden retriever. The notion makes Clay laugh audibly down his phone as he shifts against the luke-warm leather of his chair.

“What would you be then?” He asks through unsuppressed chuckles as he plays with the hem of his green hoodie and attempts not to look like an idiot smiling widely to himself sitting in front of his empty screens.

“Hmmm,” George contemplates for a moment before deciding, “I think I’m more of a cat.”

Clay huffs out a laugh, “Why? Because you’re cute?”

Warmth suddenly seeps over his skin, making him smirk and wait impatiently for George’s verbal response to match.

“I- You-,” Clay can practically picture him shaking his head in frustration as crimson creeps over his cheeks, “No, because I’m, uh, independent, observant-“

“Small...”

“*Shut up, Clay.*”

His soulmate utters out through embarrassed chuckles and a gritted grin, causing Clay’s chest to swell even larger with glistening pride.

“And cuddly?” He continues trying, making George laugh and protest even harder.

Ideas suddenly flood his brain, unintentionally overwriting those worrying ones that had been occupying his mind all day, and Clay finds himself unable to stop himself from asking, “*Are you a person who likes hugs?*”

Short silence follows his question, Clay just waits though because he can feel his soulmate’s careful contemplation.

“Not- Not normally,” George breathes out, quieter than before, “But, uh, with the right person... I guess, yes.”

Clay traps his tongue through his teeth and stares up at the patterned swirls in the dry white paint scattered across his ceiling as he scrunches up his eyes and asks.

“... am *I* the right person?”

The world around him appears to slow to half-speed. The trees visible out of his bedroom window rustle back and forth in the wind leisurely, and the clouds roll backwards in the sky. Spaces between the loud thumps of his heart against his chest lengthen by the second before George replies.

“Of course you are.”

There’s deep-red marking his soulmate’s cheeks as he admits it but it still means all the same and so much more to Clay that he thinks his heart might just burst.

Suddenly, he’s not all that anxious about what he’s going to do when he greets George at the airport. In fact, there’s now a very clear image in his mind.

Three days to go. Clay tells himself inside his head, *Three more days.*

~

“Do you have everything, Honey?”

His mum’s voice carries loudly through the humid air of a very early morning in sunny Florida. Clay can’t help rolling his eyes because she’s almost acting like he’s driving to the airport for a *holiday* rather than picking George up.

“Yes.” He drawls for the fifteenth time; what more does he need other than his car, gas and his ability to drive the damn thing anyway?

He smiles politely at his mum because he knows she only means well and is excited for him, she grins broadly back at him from their front lawn and gives him a thumbs up. Gripping the rim of his car door, Clay’s about to seat himself carefully in the driver’s side when he hears another loud noise.

“Good luck son!” His dad cheers loudly as he pokes his head out of the front door with an apron still wrapped around his waist, “Have fun!”

Clay tries not to sigh exasperatedly as he thanks him and returns his smile with a tentative wave, watching his mother disappear behind him back into the house. He’s starting to think he might have made a mistake by letting his family know what time George’s plane was due to land, which was very early in the morning. When Clay had first learnt of the time, he’d been quite pleased, thinking the early start meant that he would escape the good intentions of his family, but, apparently not.

He says his goodbyes again and finally manages to seat himself inside his car. As he reaches to turn on the air conditioning, he finds peace in the small victory that at least *one* member of his family seems to still be asleep-

Sharply knocking against the glass of his car window startles him before he gets a good look at who the perpetrator is.

Oh great. Clay moans to himself as his little sister mimes winding down his window. He follows her instructions, unwilling to learn of the consequences of defying them.

“What?”

He asks with expectant and increasingly impatient eyes. Drista grins at him malignantly.

“I just wanted to tell you to not do anything stupid. You know, like you normally do.”

Eyebrows raising as he continues to regard her with an unimpressed gaze and a half-surprised laugh, Clay asks, “Is that it?”

“Oh, and make sure to keep us updated, otherwise I think mum and dad might literally suffer a conjoined aneurysm.”

Admittedly, her hyperbole does make him wheeze and emit a curt laugh which joins harmoniously to her own.

“Okay,” He agrees, again, resisting the urge to roll his eyes for about the tenth time this morning, “You woke up this early just to tell me that?”

Drista feigns considering his question for a few seconds before agreeing, “Yes. One-hundred percent worth it, by the way. See you later, loser!”

With those words, she pokes him sharply in the shoulder through the open window, causing Clay to retract against the seat instinctively and emit a small and embarrassing yelp, before disappearing back into the front door of their house and presumably back to her early breakfast.

A large and resolute sigh escapes his lips as he finally prepares to turn on the ignition and pull out of the drive. Before his fingers even reach the smooth silver of his key, however, there’s a boom of a loud voice that he would know anywhere.

“Let’s gooooo, dude!”

Sapnap magically somehow appears at his car window, replacing the position his sister had held mere moments before. His noise level would definitely be considered by most to be ‘too loud’ for this time in the morning; Clay has resided himself to most things this morning, however, and so merely winces momentarily before he asks.

“Why are you here?”

Sapnap seems almost offended by his question.

“What? As if I’m gonna miss my best friend’s big day!” Clay continues looking at him expectantly so he continues, “I came here to psych you up before you leave.”

Dramatically, Clay stares at the clock displayed on the dash of his car before answering with tired eyes.

“Dude, it’s five am. I don’t think anyone needs ‘psyching up’.”

Sapnap voices his opinion to the contrary and Clay is half-listening until he does a double-take at the time displayed by the clock. *Fuck*.

“I- uh,” Clay says loudly, speaking over Sapnap and causing his friend to shoot him a feigned glare, “Sorry to stop you dude, but if I don’t leave now I will *literally* be late.”

Before Clay finishes his sentence, the other appears ready to fiercely argue back (he has *no idea* where this man finds all his energy), but as soon as his problem is verbalised, Sapnap’s backing up from the car with wide eyes and telling him to ‘Go, go, go!’ and ‘What are you waiting for?!’.

Clay’s toothy grin appears wholeheartedly at his friend’s genuine concern as he ignites the dull roar of his car engine.

“I love you, brother.”

He shouts loudly and sincerely to Sapnap before pulling off of the driveway and into the street, leaving a dumbfounded and stricken figure behind him. Belatedly, he hears the same phrase loudly and passionately shouted back at him before he rounds the corner onto the main road, causing his grin to widen impossibly more.

After securing his parking space and locking his car, Clay all but leaps from his car and speed walks towards the main terminal of Orlando airport, uncaring of how he’s perceived in this moment. When George is so, so close to being with him.

He forces himself to calm down slightly, just enough to be able to direct himself to the correct gate, and situates himself strategically in front of the gate when he confirms that he does still have a few minutes before passengers from the flight from London Heathrow begin arriving.

Catching sight of himself in glass of the windows panelling the back of the terminal building, Clay takes the opportunity to access his appearance like he hasn’t had his outfit planned for *days* and hadn’t spent half an hour this morning determined to get his hair to flatten in just the right way.

Unsure of what to do with his sweaty and partly shaking hands, he fingers the holes in his ripped black jeans as his foot taps restlessly against the tiled floor. He also pulls at the hems of the sleeves of his hoodie; his light blue one, which he had decided to don so that George could easily see him (he’s also often been told that the colour compliments his eyes.)

He flicks his head backwards slightly to cause the stray strands of hair to fall back into their place; with all his might, he refrains from running a practiced hand through his hair to ease his stress too.

Instead, he distracts himself with glancing over the markings made by George on his skin earlier

on after pushing up part of his sleeve; they'd exchanged messages non-stop the whole journey until George had informed Clay of his intentions to try and go to sleep for the latter part of the journey, which Clay eagerly encouraged, wanting his soulmate to actually be primarily conscious when he stumbles off the plane.

I'll be with you soon <3

Is the last thing George had written on his skin before presumably succumbing to his fatigue. Shimmering sensations had erupted in Clay's heart at their appearance, everything almost seemingly increased tenfold with the combined knowledge that he'd be able to physically touch George in less than a couple of hours.

Clay checks his phone for the time: less than a couple of minutes now.

Wanderingly, his mind considers his long self-debated topic of George's appearance. It's not something that matters, at all, to him; there's absolutely nothing that could turn Clay away from George, especially now. But, it's something that Clay's always found fun to try and imagine (he often wonders if George does the same).

Sure, George had supplied him with the base details: his fair skin, brown eyes and dark hair, but Clay quickly found he loved to try and fill in the gaps.

He reckons George's face shape is not sharp, nor too round, but rather a soft and slender in-between. George's cheeks undoubtedly blush a deep, rosy-red under his light teasing and flirtatious words and Clay finds a burning urge to cup them in the palms of his hands.

The soft bow of his soulmate's lips probably forms a soft, baby pink until roughly kissed, burning into bright red embers. The pull of his brow probably lightly furrows as they form a defiant and childish pout when something doesn't quite go his way.

God.

Clay halts his more dangerous thoughts abruptly by checking the time on his phone again. As if perfectly timed, he watches the clock tick over onto the hour and he emits a harsh breath of air as his heart rate rapidly increases.

There's so much adrenaline pumping through his veins that he almost forgets to keep an eye on his arms.

You at the gate?

Yes.

He replies with the black biro he keeps tucked into his trouser pocket at all times. Suddenly, he recalls that George had also informed him of what he'd be wearing at the time he steps off of the plane.

white shirt with black jeans and my favourite pair of vans.

Clay reads back to himself off of part of their long, long text chain from last night. By text, rather than by pen, because George had had to attend a lot of late evening lectures to qualify for the exchange program and he was stuck in one at the time.

He feels that giddy feeling wash over him again, but he's fully aware it's almost entirely from himself rather than his soulmate because he really can't get over the fact that George offered to go

to such efforts in order to be able to come and see *him*. That George, sweet, caring, kind and wonderful George, considers him worthy of such a large investment of his time and studies.

A sudden surge of people emerging from the exit of the gate catches his eyes soon enough and coaxes his focus back onto the present. Clay watches ever so carefully, studying each face thoroughly as it slides into view from around the corner and becoming increasingly frustrated when he can immediately tell it's not George.

He does this repeatedly for about two minutes before he emits a frustrated grunt at his lack of success. There's less people appearing from the gate now, trickling out of the entryway rather than flowing in a large mass. On the plus side, Clay thinks, at least it makes each person easier to see.

It's when he's taking a large gulp of air that it happens. His eager eyes lock on to the far-off, yet unmistakably pale and fair face of a young man approaching from the gate's exit. He has dark brown hair, short but not too short and long enough to slightly fall prettily across his forehead; Clay watches as it's nervously combed back into place with a hand.

Shifting his gaze, Clay sees the man has *brown* eyes, deep and warm like coffee, and the beat of his heart is drowning out all of the excess noise of the terminal until it fades slowly away. Clay greedily intakes all the features of this person's face: pink-dusted cheeks, snow-white slope of a nose and cutely furrowed eyebrows pinched in concentration, because he's so, so sure that he's right. That this is *George*, his *soulmate*, currently standing almost practically before him and he's so ridiculously adorable and pretty.

Oh God.

If Clay had already fallen he's somehow found a way to fall even harder. The breath that's already choked up in his throat catches even more when his soulmate's gaze meets his own and he sees his beautiful brown eyes widen in both realisation and surprise.

He's never wanted to move so quickly in his life, but Clay finds his feet firmly rooted to the floor. As he's gearing up all of his strength to try and push his damn feet forwards, Clay sees a hesitant and light smile quirk onto George's face and it provides him with all the motivation he needs.

Suddenly breaking free, his legs propel his body forwards before he even remembers telling it to move. The gaze between them doesn't break, something electric buzzing between them and animating both of their hearts excitedly to life.

Clay holds the gaze even as he nears George and realises just how much shorter his soulmate is compared to his height and immediately finds that he loves it. He loves the nervous yet hopeful gaze that George is currently displaying too, his eyes so bright and wide and vulnerable.

When he's a few feet away, he finally stops in his path as he asks tentatively.

"... George?"

He watches it in his soulmate's eyes. The recognition and reconciliation of a bond to a voice and a voice to a face. George lets go of his suitcase, leaving it to stand on its own and Clay is about to say something more when he finds himself barrelled into by a strong force.

Disoriented, it takes him a couple of moments to process what's going on. He peeks open his eyes that had clenched shut out of innate instinct and feels a warmth flooding around him like the glow of a burning fire. Looking down, his breath is taken away.

George is the force that has collided with him, his soulmate, having rushed forwards and flung his

arms around Clay's shoulders, holding onto him tight.

Oh. Clay suffers another malfunction as he realises that George is on his *tippy-toes*.

"Clay."

His name is breathed out by the other against his neck like a desperate gasp of air and is followed by George resting his chin on Clay's shoulder and his nose nuzzling into the scent of his neck. Every sensation of skin-against-skin causes Clay to feel as if his legs might just give out and be about as useful as jelly.

The electric current running through his body soon animates him finally to life. His own arms find it all too natural to wrap around George's middle loosely, not too sure quite yet what he's allowed, but soon tightens his grip to be similar to his soulmate's on him when he receives what has to be the cutest whine of protest Clay has ever heard in his life, ever, emitted from his soulmate's lips and mumbled against the skin of his neck.

"You're so warm."

Clay doesn't know what he's saying; he's not entirely sure he has control of his words or simple motor control over his body, but even though his words are barely uttered out, he can hear George begin to breath more lightly. *Relief*. Clay makes sure to hold him closer to his chest.

He's entirely sure George is aware of what he's referring to, also. Not only his soulmate's physical warmth, but the change in the bond; what once felt like a pleasant back-glow of sunlight on their lives now has been amplified tenfold into shimmering streams of eternal warmth, engulfing them both into a comforting embrace and further intertwining their souls.

Clay's cheeks are aching from the unstoppable grin that's been occupying them for the past few minutes, but he couldn't care less as he shuffles his hands slightly to grip into the fabric of George's t-shirt and finds the he's the perfect height to be able to rest his head against the soft fluff of his soulmate's hair. Taking a breath, he inhales a comforting scent that reminds him of sun-kissed sands and the rushing of white waves.

He doesn't know how long they stand there, unmoving, yet gripping so tightly onto each other. He does, however, feel the exact moment George seems to retract slightly into himself and realise that they're currently still standing in the middle of the airport and earning the curious looks of passers-by.

Clay pays them no mind, utterly and entirely focused on his soulmate who's not only physically before him, but in *his arms*.

But, George doesn't seem to be able to block them out in the same way, and Clay soon feels a very familiar sensation wash over the exterior of his heart and across all his skin as George moves extremely slowly, extracting himself from their embrace.

He almost wants to protest, losing the warmth of his soulmate's body against him, but the words are caught in his throat when George has moved far enough away for Clay to be able to see his face, though still positioned in the loosened loop of his arms.

George is *blushing*.

His cheeks are a beautiful array of shades of red and pink, lightly scattered against the white canvas of his skin, and Clay can barely believe that he's been privileged enough to be blessed with such a sight.

Feeling George's sudden retreat into his usual bashful state, but also a resurgence in his anxiety, Clay stoops his neck down so that their heads are closer together before he tells him in a near whisper, "I've been waiting for you."

He pours every deeper meaning into his words; George feels it because there's a sudden tug on the heartstrings connecting their souls, pulling Clay ever-deeper downwards to rest his forehead against George's whilst breathing lightly. It takes him a couple of seconds before he notices the glimmering tears forming at the corners of his soulmate's eyes, breaking his heart.

"Hey." He whispers softly, barely parting his lips and being as tender as possible.

Very quickly, he slides his hands up from his grip on George's waist and wipes the pearls of tears from his eyes with the careful pads of his thumbs. He feels George lean more heavily against him and makes the decision to gently cup his tear-stained cheeks in his warm hands, causing George to move his head to look back up at him.

Below, his soulmate's hands grasp onto the fabric of his jumper tightly as he sways on his feet. Upon holding Clay's shimmering eyes for a second with his own, George chokes out a half-laugh and his face cracks into a brilliant smile.

"I found you."

George simply says, voice broken and small from the action of his tears but audible to Clay all the same. He runs a gentle thumb over his soulmate's flushed cheek again, allowing himself time to just look down and admire the fact that George is so very *real* under his touch. That George is willingly pushing his cheek actively against Clay's reassurance and gazing up at him with wide tearful, yet hopeful brown eyes: the most beautiful sight Clay is sure he's ever seen.

"You did."

Clay whispers, placing their foreheads back together when he feels George's hands tug him by the jumper to get him closer again, also causing his face to break out into a staggering smile.

"Of course you did."

Clay drives George to his university campus. That was the plan. Beyond that, however, nothing really has really been set in stone.

He supposes that's why George sounds so hesitant when he suggests, "You could, um, come and see my dorm and stuff... if you want."

Clay pauses himself from where he was getting out of the car, having arrived them both to their destination. The words take a few seconds to process, then Clay is soon rushing to answer.

"Yes."

George appears slightly taken aback at the speed of his answer but soon a pleased grin appears on his face. Also, Clay can practically feel an onslaught of teasing from the other and so quickly continues.

"I mean," He lets out an intermittent cough into the air, "Sure, I will. I want to,"

This makes George's features light up once again, even more brightly if that was possible, and

Clay can feel a comforting sensation circling their bond.

“How else will I know where to come when I visit you?”

Clay’s last question causes a light rush of adrenaline to barrel into George’s heart (he feels it) and causes the older of the two to hold onto his gaze for a little too long as Clay removes his suitcase from the boot of his car.

“What?” Clay asks lightly, genuinely confused by his soulmate’s surprise, “Didn’t you think I would come and visit you?”

Breaking their connected gaze finally and looking up at the tall and glass-paned building that he’ll call home for the next few months instead, George replies.

“I- I don’t know. It’s just, it’s an hour from your house and it’s kind of long-“

Clay cuts him off abruptly with his words and a gentle grasp onto his soulmate’s hand which earns a surprised gasp from them both when sparks shoot across their skin. *Fireworks*, Clay thinks.

“George, listen. One hour is *nothing* compared to not being able to see you at all. *Nothing*.”

His soulmate’s dark eyes glance back up at him from where he’d been studying their connected hands and there’s a mix of slight disbelief, gratuity and new-found ease swimming in his eyes.

“Okay?”

He asks, needing George to understand. The other nods and squeezes onto Clay’s hand causing a quirking up of the taller’s cheeks. He shuffles the position of their grip before locking his car and steering George towards what appears to be the lobby of the student dorms. George’s hand is so much smaller than his in his own and the thought is making him smile all too much.

Turning his head back, George is presumably about to ask about his suitcase, only to see Clay’s already pulling it in line behind them. He thanks him with a precious grin that traps his tongue lightly between his pearly teeth. Clay’s heart positively melts at the sight.

The interior of the building is a cold and open white space with flourishing green plants bracketing each door and a sparkling of saucer lights up above. After they collect George’s key and find the right room, the shorter opens the heavy wooden door with a satisfying ‘beep’ of the security lock.

They both take a quick tour of the place before George settles himself exhaustedly against the very comfy and inviting couch in the living area that they had originally entered into. It’s not much, a small lounge area backing onto an even smaller kitchen, a bathroom with a marble-backed shower and a bedroom, with a bed already made in pure white sheets, but George soon tells Clay that it’s definitely triple the size of his dorm room back in London.

Clay lets out a laugh as he flops himself down onto an armchair, feeling almost as tired as George looks, but *he’s* not the one who suffered an eight hour flight today. Perhaps his soulmate’s fatigue is leaking into him too.

Silently, he allows himself to regard his soulmate’s peaceful and unmoving form on the sofa for a minute or so, eyes tracing the even planes of his face, the gradual slope of his brow and the dashing of his long eyelashes. The pink of George’s lips is trapped under his teeth as he stretches back against the couch, letting out a dramatic sigh. A gleam of pale skin peeks out from the bottom of his shirt where it rides up after George extends his arms.

Clay suffers an internal battle, not having let himself think about certain *things* when he was preparing to meet up with George because his anxiety was already horribly riddling his brain with other things. But now, now when his heart finally feels whole and his soulmate seems to have relaxed perfectly into his arms and found comfort in his presence, the thoughts enter his mind.

Kiss.

Feel.

Touch.

Clay's brain plays these dangerous words on repeat, but he's determined, so absolutely determined to let George make the first move, if any. Afraid of scaring him off and the mere idea of losing him for even one second.

He's still studying his soulmate's perfect, pretty face, willing these thoughts to go away when George's eyes flutter elegantly open and immediately latch onto Clay's gaze. He's looking at him almost upside-down from the positioning of the couch and the armchair, but Clay feels caught and sheepish all the same. *His* face blushes an embarrassing dark red.

Oh God.

Helplessly, he watches George's eyes narrow slyly with at least some element of recognition.

"What?" He soulmate asks, stretching his arms above his head again and resting his chin on them as he looks over to Clay, "Like what you see?"

Clay is entirely surprised he doesn't pass out.

"I- uh," His mouth feels like cotton but there's a buzzing electricity pulsing through his bones under George's merciless gaze and arched eyebrow. In an effort to escape a trap of his own making, he coughs and finishes, "Do you- Do you want to order some food?"

He asks because he's hungry and he presumes George must be too, but also in a desperate effort to distract the other. It seems to work, thank the lord, as his soulmate sits himself up at the mention of a meal and Clay sees his eyes positively gleam, making him laugh and forget the horribly red state of his cheeks for a couple of seconds.

"Hey," George exclaims at him with a tilted smile, "You'd be this excited if you'd had crappy plane food for your last meal too."

Clay pretends to consider it for a moment whilst he pulls up possible menus for various restaurants near them, and answers through badly hidden chuckles, "Fair enough, I suppose."

That earns him a glare from George that he presumes is supposed to be intimidating or something of the sort, but Clay just finds himself thinking his soulmate is *unbearably* cute when he doesn't quite get his way and tries his best to distract himself from the inviting pout on his lips.

They migrate, soon enough once the food arrives, to the dining table situated in the small kitchen; light oak wood to match the dazzlingly white tiles that line the walls. It's all so clean and new that Clay can't wait for George to settle in and make it his *own* and feel more like a home.

Clay finishes the last bite of his noodles, cleanly wrapped around his fork, and shovels it into his

mouth before emitting a satisfied hum of content. His eyes flick over to George, who's seated directly across from him and is currently very focused on directing a piece of chicken onto his fork.

He watches his soulmate quietly for a little while, leaving him immersed in his food and finding nourishment at the mere sight of him. Clay can't help but to suddenly think about how here, in George's dorm, is the first time they've truly been left alone together in person.

"So," George tries to say, slightly muffled by the last of his food in his mouth before he swallows, "Uh, how long do you think you'll stay?"

Having not exactly been thinking straight for the last couple of moments, Clay takes a few seconds to let his brain buffer.

"Here?" He asks, not really having thought about it.

His soulmate nods slowly, simultaneously holding and refusing to hold Clay's gaze; an uneasy feeling settles into his stomach. George is *nervous*.

"As- as long as you want me to be here... I guess?"

He answers hopefully, bringing a light hand to scratch the back of his head and extending his feet out under the table where one of them accidentally brushes against George's. The other doesn't move his away.

A flurry of light red storms across his soulmate's face as he seems to process his first answer. Clay catches his brown eyes at just the right time and quirks up his left eyebrow, as if challenging him to vocalise it, believing he definitely won't.

"That-," George is squirming under his heated gaze, but persisting all the same, "You might be here for a while... then."

Clay brings his hands fluidly together before him and can't stop his nervous action of fiddling with the hem of his sleeves as his emerald eyes analyse George's, studying closely for any hesitation, anything that tells him he shouldn't do anything at all.

Cautiously, he holds out his hand across the table towards George, movements slow and considerate. The older man's own palm sits merely centimetres away; when Clay tears his eyes from his own outstretched hand, he sees George's eyes fixated on his own limb, as if willing it to move.

Almost holding his breath in silence and anticipation, Clay remains perfectly still until his soulmate's hand makes the short journey to conjoin with his own, sliding into place in his large palm and settling home. Emitting a small breath, Clay surprises even himself as he does so, flicking his eyes back upwards to meet dark brown intimately.

"Is this okay?"

His voice is light and breathless and barely sounds like his own. George answers him all the same, voice barely a murmured whisper.

"...Yes. Clay, I-"

His words fall off as said man dares to slide his fingers forwards and up George's forearm, finding the beating pulse of blood in his veins under his pale wrist and moving swiftly further upwards to

slowly push up George's t-shirt sleeve, leaving him plenty of time to pull away.

He doesn't.

Clay holds his breath as he sees his own messy words scrawled across George's pale canvas-like skin in dark black ink. He fingers the words lightly, skimming over the skin wonderfully and immediately feeling the pleasant sensation that George feels within from his actions.

He moves his steady gaze upwards and into deep pools of swimming light. George, too, watches carefully as he follows suit, pulling back Clay's blue sleeve to expose his neat words against his tanned skin. The room is full only of sharply inhaled breaths as George copies him, running barely-there touches across his own compositions of earlier in the day.

Their eyes meet again and this time there are no emotional walls constructed or in the way, only them. Only each other, like a mirror reflective of the soul.

"C- Clay, I-"

George tries again, only to be cut off by Clay finally relenting and leaning up and over the table to crash his burning lips against his soulmate's.

A shocked gasp is sounded from the other, warm air against his lips, but when Clay brings his free hand to gently cradle the warmth of George's cheek the other finally seems to catch up and push his lips back against Clay's.

There's a heat that feels so unstoppable welling within them both. The sun. Their bond is like the sun; eternal and undying, bright and ever-present, a necessity.

They're kissing lavishly, pressing firmly against each other, and then George tilts his head ever so slightly and their lips slip even closer together. *Deeper.*

The swirling and heated sensation within Clay is so strong that he has to clutch harder onto his soulmate's cheek to steady himself and George responds in turn by bringing his own spare hand to fold over it, locking his fingers in between Clay's against his own skin.

Each point of contact is absolutely eclectic. So *right*. George hums enthusiastically into the kiss when Clay slides his tentative tongue against his lips and reciprocates in turn by introducing his own; his soulmate tastes so incredibly sweet.

Clay suddenly has a thought, and he hates it because it means he has to pull back but he does anyway, marking the cute noise of protest his soulmate makes and the pale stretch of his neck as he tries to lean upwards to coax him back in.

"... Was *that* okay?" His heart is absolutely bursting out of his chest as his green eyes study the entirety of his soulmate's face.

George is looking up at him with the most beautiful wide and adoring eyes, but a look that looks amazingly unimpressed and fond as he laughs and tells him, "You're such an idiot." and shakes his head even further when Clay refuses to take that for an answer, arching one of his brows and smoothing his hand still cupping his cheek against his blushing red skin.

"Yeah," George lets out a shaky breath and a absolutely dazzling smile before composing himself and ending rather shyly with exposed and open eyes, "... do it again?"

Clay's grin widens immensely as he swoops back down to capture George's perfect pink and

inviting lips back into a luscious kiss, lingering sweetly before pulling himself upwards again to speak and letting go of George momentarily to finally round the table and stand even closer before him.

He tucks his arms carefully around George's shoulders and neck once he's stood up too and leaning slightly against the wood of the table. They're both breathing in sync again as Clay's head nears his soulmate's and rests lightly against his forehead as he whispers out his words, smiling as he speaks.

"I would have done that so much earlier," He admits, taking a large breath to replenish his lungs, "but there were so many people around..."

It's not that he cares at all about people seeing or whatever, it's just that it suddenly feels so, so right that this moment right here is so intimate and only for *them* and them alone. He knows George can feel what he means, the shorter man weaving his own arms around Clay's sturdy waist as he pushes his head slightly forwards against the taller's and takes a shaky breath.

Leaning back slightly, Clay is met by George immediately reaching upwards eagerly on his tippy-toes in an attempt to procure another kiss with a hopeful grin. Clay chuckles so happily to himself as he swoops his head down again to align their mouths and delve into a deeper kiss.

The sounds they produce bounce around the emptiness of the new kitchen, against the smooth tiles, light gasps and moans. Clay's large hands somehow work their way into George's short, dark and silky hair, threading through the strands and touching absolutely every inch of skin he can.

George's mouth is wet and delectable against his own, already emitting sinful sounds that are doing no good for Clay in this moment where he's trying to maintain *some* self control.

It's nothing, however, compared to when George slips his mouth away, leaving Clay hanging his head awkwardly in mid-air and about to ask or complain and then feeling George's heated lips attach to the sensitive skin of his exposed neck. He had certainly *not* anticipated this at all, but it feels so, so good that he practically loses himself to the pleasure, casting his head back with a loud surprised moan and bearing his neck perfectly for George to attack again.

He's sure his soulmate is leaving him with red and pink splotches across the expanse of his tan neck, working his way tantalisingly slow back up to meet Clay's open lips and licking sweetly into his mouth with his tongue.

Clay might have just *literally* ascended and touched the clouds of heaven, before falling back to Earth and reality.

When he opens his eyes slightly at the sensation of George pulling back for a second and taking a quick breath, Clay is met with a still somehow bashful and blushing face, but one that is also coupled with a very pleased and satisfied grin.

Oh, Clay thinks to himself as he continues to play with the strands of his soulmate's hair at the nape of his neck, *So it's like this is it? Two can play at that game.*

Clay encourages George lightly via a tap on the back of his head to reunite their lips in a kiss, which he does eagerly, and Clay bites down pleasantly on his lower lip to distract him whilst his hands skim quickly down his body and beside his thighs until it's too late and he's hooking his arms firmly under them and lifting George steadily upwards to place him on the surface of the kitchen table.

George emits the most beautiful gasp against his lips, which Clay hungrily swallows down and continues his actions to redden his soulmate's plump lips.

He walks himself even closer to George, positioning himself in between the shorter's spread thighs and trying desperately *not* to think, think, think whilst running his wandering hands up and down his back, clutching into the soft fabric of his shirt.

His soulmate's head is practically level with his own now that he's been placed atop the table; a thought that causes Clay to smile even more widely into their passionate kiss and withhold his giggles. He fails miserably and has to pull back from their kiss for a moment to catch his breath and let out a light wheeze. George allows him to pull slightly back in the loop of his embrace and looks at him confused but can't help, apparently, joining in his light laughter all the same. The infectious and bubbly feeling flooding in between the two through their bond.

The intermission causes the pace of their administrations to slow considerably and neither of them seem to mind, placing much more emphasis onto the intimate nature of their kiss: skin on skin, warmth and the delicious smack of lips. There's a newly woken and eternal fire crackling in the pits of their souls, bond now entirely alive and flourishing in their close proximity and prolonged skin contact.

George huffs out a surprised and breathless laugh, clearly having just felt the same thing, and holds Clay's half-lidded and adoring gaze boldly. Those bright and beautiful eyes are laced with vulnerability and hope; Clay would say the words right now if he could. If it hadn't only been a day since they've been able to touch and physically feel each other.

He'd whisper them lowly for George only to hear, and he'd mean each and every single word.

Chapter End Notes

ahhhh, thank you for all the support as always! you guys are the absolute best, i love you all :.)

breathe

Chapter Summary

George experiences new beginnings with Clay by his side (and some other people he picks up along the way) and at Clay's football match, things don't quite go to plan...

Chapter Notes

hellooo

i'd just like to quickly say that i enjoy writing this fic so, so much so i'm very grateful for all your support and motivation that allows me to do so :)<3

this chapter is quite long but it felt mean to cut it off anywhere else- hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

George wakes with the warmth of the sun over him, wrapping its strong and steady arms around his heavy body falling into the plush surface of the mattress.

He peeks out a dazed eye from under his long and fluttering lashes and is met with a sea of white sheets, rumpled and carelessly strewn across the expanse of his double bed. Light streams in effortlessly through the large window, casting the room alight with a morning amber.

Lifting his head slightly upwards, he's halted when a breath of air escapes into his hair, ruffling it delicately. George's eyes blink open slowly for a couple of seconds, processing, before he feels a firm grip tighten around his waist and he inhales a familiar, comforting scent.

Clay.

His soulmate's arms are positioned tightly and protectively around him, one cupping his waist and the other hand placed on top of one his own where it lays splayed on Clay's chest, alongside his head.

George's front is tucked against the left side of the taller; chest to chest and his face is nuzzled into the invitingly warm crook of his soulmate's neck. The covers are half-on, half-off of them and there's a dull hum of rush-hour traffic that can be heard dancing on the horizon. His head rises and falls slowly with Clay's rhythmic inhalations, like lazy waves lapping onto a beach.

He very much does *not* want to move right now, at all. Or even preferably for the rest of time.

Thankfully, the both of them had established that they had nothing planned for the next day on the previous night. They'd talked and talked into the cooling evening until Clay practically insisted that George at least got into his bed because he'd suffered a eight-hour plane journey (to which George protested until Clay reassured him he'd be coming with him).

Upon entering the room, the plush white sheets had immediately appeared inviting to him, calling

out for his aching and fatigued body to crash heavily into. But George's body had stiffened at one side of the bed as he stared, watching Clay pull back the covers from the other side and settle down.

"What?" His soulmate had asked with a raised eyebrow and an opening of his arm nearer to George, "You not gonna come here?"

Clay had the most beautiful and alluring grin spread across his face, so how on earth could any reasonable human have said 'no'?

George had eagerly slid himself under Clay's arm with a tender and soft smile, immediately feeling the warmth of their bond swell within his chest again. He tried his utmost not to blush as his soulmate pulled him closer into his side and tucked his head over his own, placing traces of kisses into his dark hair, but of course he failed, leaving a very pleased-looking Clay to catch his wandering eyes.

Clay's original intentions for last night had not been to stay over, as far as George is aware, and he's positive he was definitely the first out of the two of them to succumb to sleep. So this leaves him with the heart-warming knowledge that, not only had his soulmate let him fall asleep leaning up cosily against his chest, but he had also made the decision to *stay*.

Unable to suppress the grin that's currently creeping onto his cheeks, George does his best efforts to bury it into Clay's chest (which is still decorated with the sky-blue material of his jumper... George may or may not make a mental note to somehow try and steal it). He hopes that the increased pounding in his chest doesn't wake the other, loving the view of his soulmate's dirty-blond hair that falls so prettily over his tanned features when he manages to slightly crane his neck at the right angle.

George roams his eyes eagerly over the other's face, tracing the steep slope of his nose and the light dusting of freckles littered there, as well as the light-red of Clay's lips that he has now finally felt against his own.

Blood rushes back into his cheeks as he recalls the events of last night further; curiosity gets the better of him as he allows his eyes to trail downwards from his soulmate's face and onto the expanse of his sun-kissed neck, on show from the way Clay's head is leant back against the pillows.

His blush further refuses to relent when his eyes slightly widen upon the discovery that the marks George all-too-vividly remembers making last night, lavishly trailing his tongue and teeth across his soulmate's neck, are still very much there, tinging his skin a darker purpley-blue.

The desire to reach out and touch them is tempting, but George's wish to remain tucked up against Clay's warmth for a majority of the day is impossibly stronger.

George is tilting his head ever so slightly upwards to try and receive an even better view of his own work, when Clay emits a string of inaudible mumbles, presumably in his sleep as he does not seem to stir any further (George could almost swear he heard his name thrown in there too, but he can't be sure).

He stops his movements and attempts altogether, resorting to simply pressing his face back into his soulmate's chest again and revelling in just how amazingly adorable, considerate and kind Clay is. George thinks he couldn't have possibly have been any luckier.

The bond forged so deeply between them has never felt so strong or alive, almost like another

beating entity in itself, and it wraps a blanket of further comfort over George every time he searches for it and finds it still there, with Clay on the other end.

George revels in blissful tranquility for about another half an hour, still unwilling to force himself to move, before he feels the hints of his soulmate's return to the conscious world.

Clay's fingers lace more intricately into George's hand that is splayed across his chest, his breathing shallows, and his head is lifted slightly off of George's (much to his dismay). Then Clay speaks, and it's low and croaky and exacted through a half-yawn but audible all the same.

"Morning."

Flicking his eyes up just in time to catch the shimmering emerald gaze cast down his way, George feels his limbs fall even more lax at the expression of emotions he receives. And *fuck*.

Of course Clay's morning voice is fucking hot.

Sparkling newfound experiences within him that he is entirely too exhausted to mentally examine right now, George elects to do his best to ignore his soulmate's tone, merely leaning his head even further upwards towards Clay to see what he will do.

The taller simply stares placidly into his brown eyes for a couple of seconds before one of his large hands moves to caress George's pale cheek with the lightest of touches. George's tongue darts out across the dry surface of his lips nervously before retreating just as fast; he watches his soulmate's eyes follow the movement rather interestedly and holds Clay's green gaze bravely.

Some of his courageousness and determination must flow over into Clay, because the other chuckles quietly as he moves his head closer to George's, slowly closing the detestable gap between their lips and making sure to linger the touch there, shooting glittering tingles across his skin.

"Mmm."

George finds himself only able to respond in a hum pressed against Clay's lips; one that is wholly satisfied and content. His acts must amuse his soulmate even more as his chest fluctuates abruptly, causing George's head to wobble up and down a little.

"Are we..." Clay starts in a louder and clearer voice this time, although it's still tinged with fatigue, "planning on getting out of bed anytime soon?"

Moving for the first time in what is probably a good few hours and feeling half of his bones click in the process, George musters all of his strength to push himself up on his front as he responds to Clay, hovering above the other. His soulmate follows his actions with his eyes intently.

"That would be the complete opposite of my plan, actually."

He decides to inform him, taking immense pleasure in the beaming grin that's breaking onto Clay's face and the ever-rising levels of warmth within. Very quickly, George soon feels solid arms reach up and wrap around his shoulders locking him in closer to Clay's body all over and pushing their faces so closely together that their noses brush.

"I like this idea." Clay clarifies with a sure nod as George melts on the inside, feeling his soulmate's warm and soft lips against his own when he finishes.

Before he can answer him, however, a loud and auspicious '*ping*' resounds about the room at

which Clay suddenly pulls his face away from George's (causing him to both pout and curse technology) as he reaches for his phone on the beside table.

Halfway through his actions, Clay must recognise his soulmate's dissatisfaction and shoots him an apologetic smile and a tender rub of his warm, pink cheeks as he explains that he never actually *told* his family not to expect him to return last night and that they were probably wondering where he was.

George supposes he can make an exception on those grounds... it doesn't stop him from swooping down and stealing another kiss from his soulmate before he even has the chance to slide open his phone, however, and smirking to himself as he pulls back and sits himself up to find Clay looking partly taken aback and partly thoroughly intrigued until he suddenly seems to remember his original task.

With a slight pout, George reluctantly leans back down to tuck his head yet again into the warmth of his soulmate's chest and heaves out a small sigh, causing the other man to chuckle as he taps away at his phone. George swears he almost could have fallen back to sleep if Clay hadn't taken in a harsh and sudden breath, jolting his head off of his chest.

Alarmed at both the sound and the adrenaline that shoots to his heart in surprise, his head turns quickly upwards to face Clay, eyes tracking every inch of his skin for injury or distress.

However, all he's met with is the image of his soulmate's disbelief as he studies himself in what is presumably the camera of his phone and tilts his neck further back whilst still trying to maintain his view. George's creations from the previous night stand strikingly apart from the tan expanse of Clay's skin; bold blues and purples littered across the underside of the right of his jaw and crawling down towards the collar of his hoodie.

Once satisfied that his soulmate is in fact okay, George's emotions soon burst into those of colourful amusement as he watches Clay touch his fingers to the areas before hissing lightly and jerking them away as the skin is most likely still tender there. His suppressed snickers earn him a mock glare from the other, still diluted by his shock of the discovery. George only holds his eyes in a pleased silence.

"God," Clay begins, making George feel slightly relieved because it means that he doesn't have to, "You just about *mauled* me last night."

There's no malice behind the taller's words, coupled with what appears to be both a blissed grin and the shimmering of a smirk. His face is still very close to his soulmate's despite the action George had made to shuffle away and observe him; George feels compelled to bring them even closer again, despite the blooming red of his cheeks.

Clay's statement is coupled with one of his hands crawling up the small of George's back before he continues with more of a groan, "*Georgeeeee*."

This enacts an irresistible string of giggles from said man that only adds to his darkening blush.

"What?"

He asks indifferently, to the best of his current ability, which turns out to be not so successful as it earns a raise of eyebrows from Clay.

"These marks! I eventually have to go back and see my friends, my family and- oh god, my *sister*... I'll never hear the end of it."

Even though his soulmate finishes with the sound of a defeated sigh, he still laughs gently, smile spread across the features of his face, looking undeniably elated and blithe. George, on the other hand, has resorted to burying his burning cheeks and abashment into the sun-stroked covers, refusing to meet the others eyes.

There he remains for a couple of seconds before a large and gentle hand finds its way into his hair. He raises his head at Clay's soft encouragement.

"Why are *you* blushing?"

He asks in the softest of tones alongside a small laugh, reaching with his fingers to trace patterned swirls against his red cheeks. George shakes his head as he responds, mumbling against the fabric of Clay's hoodie.

"Mmmf, I don't *knowwww*," He draws out the last word to mimic his distress and he can feel Clay's curiosity tickling at his heart, "I- I just guess maybe I feel bad now. For not asking if I could...before..."

He trails off, knowing that Clay gets the drift when his soulmate's hand takes light but firm hold of his chin and positions it upwards so that he's looking at him. Clay's eyes are clear and open as he speaks, almost making George want to divert his vulnerable gaze elsewhere but his eyes seem to have become transfixed.

"Well," Clay starts, holding their gaze steadily, fingers still gently moving against his skin, "Just know I would have said yes, like, a million times over."

His soulmate's triumphal grin is so amazingly dazzling that George wants to kiss him again as the wonderful and now familial feeling of comfort washes into his heart and aids to cool his poor cheeks. He does. Or, at least, he tries to until Clay teasingly draws his head away from the shorter's lips.

Drawing back with a displeased expression, yet still very much positioned above Clay, George shoots him a disproving and confused raised eyebrow.

All he receives in return is a bright and cocky smirk until he suddenly feels the sheets below his body disappear as two strong arms effortlessly flip their positions. George bounces back against the soft bed, eyes wide and heart still recovering from the surprise, and is met with the breathtaking view of his soulmate positioned above and over him... *on top* of him.

Clay's tanned skin shines gold in the morning sun; his emerald eyes appear to gleam effortlessly brighter as he gazes down at George's bewildered state, maintaining his smug grin.

"*Oh George~*" Clay calls in a low sing-song tone as his eyes darken with decided purpose, causing the hairs on the back of George's neck to petrify in the most exhilarating way, "Don't you think I deserve something in return?"

Slowly returning to himself, George squirms slightly under Clay's weight, only to have two strong hands very quickly collect his wrists into secure grips beside his head on the plush pillows. The grip isn't so tight that he couldn't release himself if he wanted to, and he knows Clay would immediately stop if he says he wants to, but George plays along all the same, captivated by what his soulmate could possibly be after.

"What would that be?"

Clay's eyes gleam brighter as he asks; pleasure bumps up against his heart. The taller pretends to

contemplate for a second with an adorable tilt of his blond head, but soon answers.

“I’m afraid the only remedy here is to balance the scales,”

George watches him carefully with wide eyes, wondering if his soulmate is suggesting what he thinks he’s suggesting.

“You know... what’s the saying?” Clay continues as he begins to draw his reddened lips closer to where George desperately wants them to be, “An eye for an eye?”

Suppressing the desire to roll his eyes at the fact that his soulmate is such an attractive and philosophical *idiot*, George’s lips stretch into an anticipatory grin as he leans his head back further against the luxurious pillows and near enough bares his pale neck for Clay to see.

Halfway through his act, however, one of Clay’s hands shoots upwards to stop his motion and holds his head steady as he finally brings their lips together in a passionate and burning kiss.

George can’t stop the moan that falls from his lips in satisfaction as he feels the warmth he had so missed spread within him and into each of his bones. Clay wastes no time, however, in migrating to his empty neck and placing open-mouthed kisses there that produce delectable sounds from George as he presses his head back into the pillows and turns to the side slightly to grant the taller easier access.

Hands now free, George takes the opportunity to slip them around his soulmate’s neck, hooking him only closer to his body and resounding their glowing warmth. Soon, the taller introduces his teeth, scraping them against the sensitive and empty plane of his soulmate’s neck, shooting electrifying sensations up and down his spine and leaving deep red marks.

After nibbling and biting, Clay wonderfully runs his tongue across the tender skin, causing George’s breaths and moans to hitch even more in his throat as he shifts against Clay, toying with strands of his hair and pulling gently.

When Clay pulls back momentarily to inspect his handiwork, George uses his grip in his hair to halt him for a moment as he appreciates the view above him: his soulmate, all panting and out of breath from well and truly ravaging him, sits in the midst of pools of gold, backed brilliantly by the sun that appears to crown him with a halo of bright light.

George’s breath eludes his lungs entirely.

He’s so beautiful.

He thinks as he caresses the back of Clay’s neck and the other pushes back lightly against his touch with a soft smile. The vision sends an intimate spark to the chambers of his heart.

Beautiful. He thinks again. Our bond is beautiful too.

~

Breakfast consists of mere cereal from the ‘welcome package’ that George had received from the university. Neither of them mind, though, as it saves them from venturing out into the real world and staying within their safe little bubble of warmth and comfort.

After finishing first, George sits across from Clay at the kitchen table, staring absentmindedly at the mesmerising movement of his hands as the cogs in his mind turn, trying to form some sort of plan for the rest of his day.

Clay's spoon clatters against porcelain as he finishes his last bite, dramatically casting the bowl away from himself as he does and consequently catching George's eyes fixed onto his hands. This earns him a pleased smirk, so very quickly, he intends to change the topic.

"I think I'm going to have a shower soon."

His soulmate loses his smile, presumably because that means almost ten minutes without being directly side-by-side. George laughs lightly and rolls his eyes.

"C'mon, we literally fell asleep in our clothes from yesterday and mine have been in two different countries and not to mention an *airplane*."

This argument seems to nullify Clay's protest, but doesn't eliminate it all the same as he gives him a sullen nod. George kicks his soulmate's foot under the table, suddenly breaking out a battle between the two before it dissolves into breathless laughter and George's inevitable win.

"*Fineeee*."

He hears Clay drawl out as he moves to leave for the bathroom and set everything up. Before he reaches the doorway, however, Clay interjects, "Oh- uh. Actually, could you... wait a couple of minutes?"

His soulmate's sudden raise in tone causes him to drift back towards the table. He stands across from him and rests his hands on the back of the chair he was previously seated on.

"... why?"

George asks, both intrigued and confused at his soulmate's sudden protest. Clay looks like he regrets ever speaking immediately with skin flushing light red and an unspoken and hesitant feeling translating across their bond.

"I- um," There's a few more seconds of heavy contemplation until Clay finally finishes with a resigned sigh, "Never mind."

However, George's interest has been thoroughly peaked at what possible source of information could have caused his seemingly well-held soulmate to blush at its mere thought.

Lightly, he tells Clay, "It's okay... you can tell me, if you want."

Emerald glazed eyes meet his own, only now making George realise that Clay had been attempting to avoid his gaze and duck his head. His heart plummets a little in concern, which presumably prompts Clay to answer and he rushes out his reply.

"I- uh-," Clay laughs at himself and his inability to speak; George can feel him searching for the right words to say, "So, ever since we started talking on my birthday, I sort of- um, take photos of the messages you write that I really want to keep?"

George's gaze is fixed, watching Clay's cheeks blush an even darker crimson, reminiscent of a rose, and his heart travels a fell swoop as he processes his words. Each one arrives into his chest and bursts into brilliant colour, easing the weight that was growing in his chest instantly.

Unfortunately, Clay has returned to averting his eyes from George's as he speaks, studying the pattern of the kitchen wall tiles with focus as his fingers tap rhythmically against the wood of the table. If he glanced a look, he would see the unparalleled softening of George's eyes and the uncontrollably fond grin that works its way across his face.

What does grab Clay's attention, however, is that he can *feel* all of this too: the knocking of his heart in his chest, the comforting nothingness settled into his brain and the undeniably strong urge to reach out and touch his soulmate.

He does.

He moves swiftly around the table and he does, tilting Clay's chin upwards lightly as he halts beside him. The green eyes almost look tempted to shift away once again, but George manages to pin them in place finally; they are open, wide and vulnerable.

"You're so cute."

George tells him with a beaming grin as he continues to hold and gaze into his eyes. He watches in delight as he sees and feels Clay process his words, a rush of something electric sparking down his spine, and receives nothing much in the way of words apart from a very light mumble along with the gracious return of his toothy grin.

Lowering himself down slowly, George places a lingering kiss into his soulmate's dark-blond hair, catching the warmth and freshness of his scent in the process. The comfort the moment brings leads him to admit something as well, thinking it may alleviate some of Clay's abashment.

"I keep our messages too..." He starts boldly, voice loud and clear, until Clay's blond head snaps upwards to look at him with the most beautiful glimmer of mirth in his eyes, "I- um, write my favourites down in a notebook."

He'd too thought about taking photos of his ink-marked skin, or immortalising their conversations down in the notes app on his phone, but he had found great comfort in the act of rewriting his soulmate's blush-inducing compliments and promises to him, as well as having them be something material. Something he can physically *touch*.

Clay's blush seems to have infused over to his skin as heat runs wild across his cheeks; his soulmate loves it, he can feel it. But just as Clay looks as though he's about to open his mouth to tease him, George talks over him.

"Oh, no, no, no. *You* can't tease me for that, you do the same exact thing!"

Huffing a laugh, Clay shakes his head as he responds, glancing up at George with gleaming eyes at a juvenile angle, "What? I just think it's cute too, that's all."

George gives him a slight frown before he bursts into joyous laughter of his own, telling Clay to take his photos quickly because he's going to set up his shower *now*, suddenly eager to feel fresh and clean. Dramatically, Clay grabs his phone from beside him and begins pulling up his light-blue sleeves, unveiling his marked right arm.

George rolls his eyes and shoots him a grin over his shoulder before he exits the room completely and starts grabbing himself towels and a new set of clothes.

He also suddenly realises he has no idea what they're going to do for Clay if he wants to change his clothes, as George's are definitely all too short or small. Sighing at his strife, he runs a hand through his hair as he reaches up to turn on the shower to let it warm up a bit; he really doesn't

want his soulmate to abandon their day together early just because he has to go home to get changed.

George is still mentally and physically struggling, managing to get his arms and head all thoroughly mixed up in all the different holes, when he hears a rhythmic thumping noise.

It takes him a moment to process, as he hurriedly tugs his t-shirt back over his head and flips the shower back off, that this is probably what knocking on his front door sounds like; he just hasn't had the chance to get used to it yet.

Sighing at the inconvenient timing, George trudges over to the door and is met with a very confusing sounding conversation that flows down the small corridor of his apartment and into his ears.

“George!”

The first voice is unfamiliar, yet so loud and enthusiastic that he can practically feel the chaotic energy exuding off of this particular individual. George is about to get worried about *how* exactly this person got into his apartment until he peeks round the corner of the door and realises that Clay has answered for him and is currently standing very still, staring at the other man before him with a crease in his brow as he counters in a confused tone, “...no?”

The other man's energy seems to almost die down immediately with a shocked, “Oh?” as George watches him quickly check something on his phone. He's much shorter compared to Clay, like George himself, and has light-brown fluffy hair that sticks out in all directions. He's dressed in a very loud and bright block-coloured hoodie which is overwhelming enough for George to process via his colourblindness so he can't imagine how people like Clay must feel.

Speaking of his soulmate, the taller man seems to be currently regarding this stranger at the door with the utmost scrutiny and an air of protectiveness as he positions himself strategically in the doorway and stands up tall.

The smaller, bubbly male continues, however, seemingly unbothered by Clay's growing uneasiness, “That's weird... he gave me the number. This *is* apartment twenty-three, no?”

It's listening to this man's lightly-pitched voice at greater length and the mention of getting his apartment number that jogs George's memory. With a free string of laughs, he soon removes himself entirely from the bathroom doorway where he was hovering and towards the front door.

The noise attracts Clay's attention and he whips his head around quickly to him, sharp eyes almost looking as if he wants to implore George to stay back and let him deal with this possible threat. George only grins, amused at him and his defensive nature, as he slides into view beside his soulmate and in front of the doorway.

“Karl?”

He tries tentatively, hoping to god that he's right because otherwise he'll look like a right idiot. Realisation and excitement bursts onto Karl's face as he hears George speak, causing him to display a toothy grin.

“George!” He exclaims with just as much enthusiasm as the first time, “I *knew* I was right.”

George laughs loudly, unable to resist absorbing some of Karl's infectious energy. He's about to respond just as excitedly when he catches Clay's perplexed expression, brows thoroughly furrowed and green eyes flicking relentlessly between the two of them, so he turns to him instead.

“Clay,” He starts with what he hopes is a reassuring tone and raise of his eyebrows in said man’s direction, “this is Karl. We got put in contact through the exchange program a couple of weeks ago.”

His soulmate follows his hand movements with his eyes very carefully, yet his expression does not shift all that much from one of underlying unease.

“Karl, this is Clay,” George starts strongly before realising that the next part might be a little hard to decide what to exactly say. In the end, he goes with the truth.

“He’s- uh. He’s my soulmate.”

He can’t help but flit his eyes over to catch Clay’s as he finishes his words; the fondness that clouds over olive-green and the soft and subtle quirk of his lips coupled with the comforting warmth that wraps itself around his body rewards George enough for his struggles and has him turning away quickly to be forced to face Karl with now bright red cheeks.

Clay feels all too pleased with himself, pride welling within them both, as Karl speaks again.

“Oh! Nice to meet you.”

Karl says with just as much enthusiasm as ever and a wide grin. Clay doesn’t quite return the energy, but shakes his hand with a polite enough smile all the same, “You too.”

Darting his gaze in between the two males before him, George almost makes himself dizzy and attempts to snap himself out of his inquisitive trance by asking, “I thought you weren’t going to arrive for another week or so?”

“My flight ended up getting moved,” The shorter man answers with an indifferent shrug, “Luckily, they still let me move in a bit early anyway.”

Before George can question him further, Karl informs him that he lives on the floor just above him, so not too far away. George feels his mouth quirk up into a smile at this information and the buzzing energy Karl seems to exude; he’s very excited and grateful to have already found a new friend at this big and daunting American university, even if he’s not on his course, and suddenly feels less nervous to explore campus for the first time tomorrow. Maybe he could get Karl to accompany him.

“Anyway,” The brunet finishes off with a sigh after rambling about his experiences on campus so far, tucking his hands into the front of his hoodie as he does so, “I just wanted to say hi as I know you’d flown in yesterday! I’ll leave you two to it.”

After George acknowledges his words and says a brief ‘goodbye’, slightly whiplashed from the chirpy nature of the other, Karl disappears down the brightly-lit corridor and around the corner to where George vaguely remembers the elevators to be. He likes Karl a lot, even after having known him less than a month. He thinks they could be very good friends.

The click of his front door shutting draws his attention to Clay once again. He flicks his eyes upwards and excitedly, preparing to gush about his new friend already and share his happiness at seemingly settling in so easily when he suddenly catches the stormy feeling brewing along the borders of his heart.

Dark blue skies roll effortlessly over, bringing heavy grey clouds and an unsettling rumble in its depths. George narrows his eyes in an attempt to pinpoint his soulmate’s emotions, confused at what could have brought such a disconcerting feeling to their chests. This is only amplified when

Clay doesn't match his eyes, instead walking past him and landing himself heavily onto his plush couch.

It's only upon further and deeper inspection of their bond that George recognises the emotion tinging his heart, rather unfamiliar with it himself.

"Wait,"

He says, landing himself lightly beside his soulmate on the sofa and finally earning a glance of his striking green eyes from where they had been previously tracking the movements of his own fingers as they pick idly at his fingernails. A small smirk works its way onto his cheeks.

"Were you... *jealous*?"

George watches in delight as Clay's emerald eyes widen minutely at his guess. There's a shift in the storm of his heart that shakes the land like thunder and electrifies his entire body like lightning, like he's been *caught*, and George has never been prouder.

"Pfft," Clay starts with an incoherent sound of dismissal, barely holding his gaze, "What? No. Jealous? Me? ... no."

His eyebrows raise in part disbelief as his bright grin persists on his face, feeling his own sunny glee begin to taint the dullness within them. Clay continues, but it does nothing to aid him.

"It's- uh, it's good that you're making, you know... *friends*."

George can't help shifting himself physically closer to his soulmate on the couch, and resting a hesitant hand on his knee whilst holding Clay's eyes with a perplexed gaze. Relief washes over him as the younger immediately takes his open palm into his own and laces their fingers tightly together.

"I'm sorry," Clay finally relents in a mumble, low and melancholy, after a few minutes of waiting and presumably contemplating how George is feeling too, "I- I don't know what's wrong with me, I-"

He stops momentarily when George leans even closer towards him until the sides of their bodies are touching and he's able to rest his head on Clay's firm shoulder. Above, he hears his soulmate take a sharp breath in, instantly feeling better once he knows that's he's already been forgiven. He squeezes his hand.

"I know there's no reason to be jealous, like at all," Clay looks down to George now clutching at his one arm that's just sitting in his lap and looking up at him with fond eyes; he laughs a little lightly, "It just came over me... I guess... when I found out that you and Karl already know each other pretty well."

George listens and hums as Clay seems intent on continuing on, rambling.

"I suppose that might be because Karl's the first person I've met who does..." He looks up at the ceiling absently as he apparently considers something, brow furrowing as he returns his gaze back to land on George's brown eyes, "Maybe the bond just wants me to have you all to myself."

His comment earns a gentle punch from George into the soft fabric of his chest before he finally brings his head level with his soulmate's, eyes watching intently.

"And what about you?"

George asks with a breathless giggle, feeling Clay's arms begin to weave around his waist, trapping him warmly against his body.

"What do *you* want?"

"The same, of course," Clay mouth quirks upwards boldly as he answers, eyes roaming over the kind features of George's face again.

"I want *you*. All the time. *You*."

There's no longer a storm: no thunder, powerful lightning or impending rains. Instead, the blinding, wondrous sun peeks over the dark horizon casting brilliant oranges and yellows within the reflection of them both.

"You have me," George tells him, voice barely a whisper against the skin of Clay's heated cheek, "You'll always have me."

~

The next day, George is spending his first night in his new apartment alone after Clay has been reluctantly forced to return back to his house so that he might actually wake up with the motivation to attend his school day rather than spend the day curled up in George's arms.

George was also ejected out of their small bubble of bliss sooner than he would have liked as today was his first day of classes for his course. Attending several introductory lectures and having to find his way around the big and confusing maze-like campus apparently has both physically and mentally tired him out, he soon realises as he flops backwards onto his bed.

The first thought that immediately springs to mind is that the sheets are colder without his soulmate's hot-running body to snuggle up against. This also sparks a chain reaction that has him digging his phone out of his pocket and hitting 'call' on his most recents, a deep and insistent urge tugging within him to hear the younger's comforting voice and to share the findings of his day.

The phone barely completes two rings before it's hastily picked up with a simple, "George~."

He loves that he can hear Clay's smile in his fond tone, knowing the way that his cheeks are probably glowing as well.

"Clay," He greets, laughing when it comes out all too formally, his soulmate quickly joining in with a familiar wheeze, "How was your day?"

Clay takes a breath in as he seems to think; George has been on enough calls with his soulmate by now to know that the light squeak he hears in the background is from when Clay leans back dangerously far in his desk chair, toying with gravity and never quite giving it the satisfaction of completing its purpose.

"Same old stuff. Spanish and history sucked, as usual, but English was kind of fun- I spent the whole time thinking about you..."

The younger man admits it so openly that George huffs out a surprised and breathless laugh loudly in to the mic of his phone.

“And then me and Sap got some football practice in too, so it was a good end to the day.”

George is still recovering, attempting to recoup his sparkling feelings that are currently firing all over the place. He hums in acknowledgment and nods his head as if his soulmate can see; Clay throws his question back at him.

He describes his day chronologically to the other man, mentioning which professors in particular that he’s already pinned as his favourites and those that he might describe as on the verge of senility, as well as his experiences at lunch when he had sat with Karl and met many other people too.

“- and then she set an essay for tomorrow. *Tomorrow!* I mean, how ridiculous, we’ve only been here a day and they’re already piling the work onto us.”

George brings his light rant to a close with a descent into laughter lowly echoed by the other. When he feels an unsure feeling brush against his chest at his words, however, he immediately focuses his attention onto Clay and dulls his words down until they’re almost inaudible, “What is it?”

His soulmate laughs melodically at his defensive tone and stance before he starts, “Oh— it’s nothing. I was just gonna ask if you’d maybe want to come and see my game tomorrow, but if you’re gonna be too overloaded with work I understand-“

“No!” George curses himself and his impulsive interjection as silence follows that soon develops into a smug smile for Clay, “No— uh. I want to come and see you... I’ll be sure to come and watch.”

As if there’s a chance that George is going to pass up the opportunity to see Clay in his football uniform, shouting and celebrating wildly, doing what he loves. He can literally *feel* the beaming grin that spreads across his soulmate’s face at his answer, the buzzing feeling soon engulfing his entire body too, setting his skin alight.

“Okay,” Clay agrees happily, although George waits before he responds because he can sense he has more to say.

When more follows through a half-stifled laugh, he’s unfortunately confirmed to be right, “... gonna be my own personal cheerleader?”

Bright red. Of *course* he’s blushing bright red.

“Oh my God, *shut up.*”

He whines helplessly, turning and burying his face in the smell of clean linen, as if it will help him seek refuge from himself; meanwhile, Clay continues to descend into a fit of wheezes and giggles down the phone with the warmest feeling filling their chests.

“... what time tomorrow?”

George just ends up asking, wanting to move on from his soulmate’s relentless teasing as soon as possible.

“Six pm. I could come and pick you up?”

His eyes roll a little as he answers, feeling Clay’s need to protect shine through the bond as if the walls between them are seamlessly transparent.

“I am capable of taking the bus, you know. Don’t you need to practice beforehand?”

Clay mumbles some protests but seems to be slowly relenting to the idea. George knows what will tip him over the edge.

“And, well, I need to learn which one I need to take when I come and visit you... don’t I.”

Their hearts are plunged into the comfort of the warmest spring, floating above the bubbling and exciting depths and wrapped in a feeling that is oh-so content.

“I-,” George can practically picture the buffering symbol floating above his soulmate’s head at he sits at his desk and desperately tries to process his words, “I guess I can live with that then... yeah.”

It’s George’s turn to smirk triumphantly, and he immerses himself entirely, enjoying his moment and staring out at the pink sunset that’s now pushing against the peak of the horizon, breaking beautifully into shards of a thousand more colours that George wishes he could currently see and describe to Clay.

“See you tomorrow, *baby*.”

The call is ended by the other party before George realises what his soulmate just said. What he just *called* him.

His head is soon buried in the softness of his sheets again where he hides his pearly grin, bitten lips and rose-tinted cheeks from the rest of the world.

God, Clay only adds to the list of reasons to fall in love with him everyday and George has already aimlessly lost track.

The pet name rings around his head as he basks in the last of the setting sun, gripping his phone tightly to his chest and taking in shaky breaths.

He’s going to kiss his soulmate so hard when he sees him tomorrow.

Clay’s high school is *huge*. Or, well, at least it is compared to a typical high school or college in England.

The main building is built from tall and light-coloured brick, dull against the slowly dimming blue sky above. There’s an American flag waving itself lazily in the wind, unbothered about becoming sun-bleached under the merciless glare, and George thinks he’s walked past about five palm trees splayed out across the sky since he’s entered the premises via the gate for the sports field.

You can’t really get more ‘Florida’ than that. He has to scoff to himself as his legs continue to move him on.

Finally, he can actually see the football pitch he’d been directed by Clay to go directly to crawl into view, where he and his team will still be warming up and practicing drills.

Checking his phone, George is happy to find he left himself plenty of time having been extremely worried about getting lost on America’s bus system, but he has graciously made it in one piece. There’s a dull murmur of chatter starting to become audible to him where he approaches the entrance to the bleachers from the back, intermittently interjected with the sharp blows of a whistle.

When he's propelled himself forwards enough for the actual pitch to fall into his view, George has to admit that he's pretty blown away. The pitch looks absolutely massive, bordered on both sides with long and high-rising white stands and staggeringly tall metal posts at either end.

George had felt big when he'd finished his high school, having outgrown each winding and large-seeming staircase he had previously struggled to scale in his first few years, finally being able to bound up and down them by the end. Here, however, even as a freaking university student, he suddenly feels very small again; it's very daunting, a twisting feeling pulling at the edges of his stomach all of a sudden.

Very quickly, he decides to distract himself, looking around hastily for the one familiar face that he knows, eyes darting from each player's uniformed body. Clay's uniform is green, George knows because he's asked his soulmate before, not wanting to get it wrong.

As the players move across the field running drills, the dark green and white jerseys gleam under the administrations of the light. Meticulously, he shifts his eyes looking for his soulmate's golden-blond head of hair glowing under the sun.

He doesn't stop looking as he tries to slide himself into a free space on the bleachers. They're not too full yet, it still being early and this being a qualifying game rather than some sort of final, but there's still a sea of white and green peppered across the stand. George slightly regrets chucking on a blue t-shirt this morning now, wishing he had considered his colour choice on a deeper level, even if most of his wardrobe does only consist of shades of blue.

His eyes are still trained on the field, following each individual player's movements and cursing the fact that almost all of them are still wearing their helmets. Giving up a little and acknowledging that he'll have to wait for a little while to see Clay or somehow tell him that he's here, George leans back against the rather uncomfortable plastic of the bench behind him and sighs a breath to try and calm his racing heart from where he'd definitely unnecessarily rushed to arrive.

A curt whistle that cuts through the air draws his posture back up a little straighter, however, as the players from Clay's school soon start running over to the side of the pitch where their coach is currently standing, many of them removing their helmets in order to be able to hear better.

George is playing with the fingers in his lap when he catches a glimpse of blond hair reflecting in the light. He fixes his eyes, focuses and clutches on to his own hand in his lap as he leans forwards slightly, almost physically drawn towards his soulmate as he watches him remove his helmet and run a quick hand through sweat-riddled hair.

It shouldn't be as hot as it is to George but, unfortunately, he has no choice on the matter: the team stands close enough to the stands that he can see each prominent feature on Clay's face carved into tan skin and the bright green glint of his adrenalised eyes. He also watches very closely as the toned muscles in his soulmate's arms shift as he mimics the action of a throw to his coach, correcting his own posture. Those are the arms that lifted him onto his kitchen table and kissed him senseless only the other day; George thinks he definitely deserves some slack.

He's just far enough back in the stands that he probably blends into the background from the pitch, but close enough that he'll definitely have a great view when the game begins. Clay's head shifts to look towards the bleachers as he thinks this, an accompanying feeling obviously betraying him, but luckily a very excitable number eight soon runs up to him and starts talking animatedly, distracting his attention back to the game.

George feels a grin appear on his face as he remembers who number eight is... *Sapnap*, Clay's childhood friend who he holds most dear. He loves the carefree laughter that the shorter man

excites from his soulmate, being able to admire Clay's beautiful tanned skin and near-sculpted jaw as his head tips back to face the sun's golden light.

George doesn't even realise it until now, but he's been holding his breath. He releases it, finally, and suppresses the urge to roll his eyes at himself.

He shouldn't get so freaking nervous at the idea of his soulmate merely looking at him, especially after all this time now, but it's the same every day. That fresh, exciting and flourishing anticipation that feels so magnificent, like standing on the edge of a tall cliff ready to jump and never quite working up the courage to make the leap into a deep blue sea.

Suddenly deciding he's had enough of orbiting feelings attacking his heart, George starts to consider reaching for the pen in his back pocket and bringing it to his skin somewhere Clay will see, or maybe even trying to find a way to grab his attention from the stands, but his focus is diverted when he sees someone seat themselves beside him out of the corner of his eye. A flash of chartreuse green and blonde.

He continues watching Clay, following his quick and nimble movements as he dodges several of his own team members in an attempt to reach the ball. George watches with his breath entirely hitched, stunned and impressed when he lands the long throw in his arms perfectly. Laughs escape his lips as his soulmate celebrates a little over-dramatically, punching his arm into the air and turning to Sappap who runs over to him to deliver a congratulatory high five.

"He's good isn't he?"

George's eyebrows fly upwards before he remembers seeing a shape vaguely sit beside him a little earlier. Finally turning to let a full image reach his eyes, George is surprised they don't fly up any further with the view he's met with.

A relatively young girl in her teens is seated beside him, donning bright dark green to match the home team's uniform along with a matching green and white scrunchie that's currently being used to tie up her blonde hair.

It takes a couple of seconds of studying further, seeing freckles, sharp cheekbones and a round face for George to draw the connection together in his busy brain.

"*Oh*," He says eloquently, turning his body inwards to face the girl, "... you're—"

"Clay's sister? Yup."

Drista, George's brain helpfully finally supplies, *Oh God*. He's not mentally prepared enough for this.

"Well— uh, hi? I'm—"

"Clay's soulmate, George. I know."

Drista gives him a gleaming and glowing look. It unsettles George just how much it reminds him of Clay and his mischievous ways when he's about to be subjected to some teasing. The thought sends a rush of tingles into his heart.

Her head tilts as she speaks again, voice loud and clear compared to how George's is still latching into the insides of his throat, "He talks about you, you know. A lot."

Great. Now there's the familiar red-hot sensation shooting to the surface of his cheeks, and this

time it's coupled with a terrible splutter as he somehow manages to choke on air.

"I— uh. He does?"

Drista looks like she's having too much fun, the corners of her mouth stretching up into the crevices of her cheeks, but George doesn't really mind, more intrigued by her claim about his soulmate.

"Mmm-hmm," She hums in agreement, holding all of George's full attention as he waits, "Like, all the time. Honestly, he won't shut up about you. Most of the time he—"

Drista is abruptly cut off by a large hand that seemingly sweeps out of nowhere from behind her, covering and muffling the words that still attempt to fall from her mouth. George is about to protest, wondering if he is about to get mugged at a flipping American football match or something of the sort, but when he glances up to look the assaulter in the eyes, he's met with warmth and kind olive-green. *Clay.*

"Hey George!" He greets chirpily, painting a comedic picture as his sister still struggles against his hands; he soon removes them entirely when Drista seems to get the message and stops trying to talk altogether, earning himself a deadly unimpressed look his way, "Glad to see you've already met my sister."

Laughter bubbles up from George's chest, some sort of weight immediately alleviated at the mere sight of his soulmate in all his golden glory against the cut-out of the sun in the rapidly darkening sky.

"Yes," He agrees, smile broadening when Clay reaches out to squeeze the top of his arm reassuringly, "We had a very interesting conversation."

The fact that it was very one-way, George decides, Clay doesn't need to know. He giggles as Drista starts to nod vigorously beside him, glad they already seem to have one goal in common, teasing Clay.

"Oh, I'm *sure* you did."

His soulmate drawls with feigned anger and a sharp look sent in his sister's direction. She laughs a loud wheeze in return and simply announces that she's going to the bathroom before leaving them both alone together on the stand, flipping Clay off as she goes and his soulmate graciously returns the gesture.

"Anymore surprise family meetings I should note down for today?"

George asks with a huffed laugh as they both watch her descend down the steps and disappear into the crowds that are very much now filing in.

"No," Clay laughs, sliding on the the bench closer to him and wrapping a firm arm across his shoulders, "I didn't think she was going to come, sorry. I would have *definitely* warned you,"

George believes him and leans into his soulmate's warm touch, even though he's already roasting from the greenhouse-like biome, as he waits for him to finish, sensing that there's more.

"If it counts for anything, I think she likes you already. You know, seeing as she didn't start cussing you out or anything,"

Clay must see his eyebrows raise into the depths of his fringe and disappear as he quickly finishes

dismissively with a shrug, “She does that sometimes.”

Chuckling at his ridiculousness, George hooks his chin over Clay’s shoulder slightly to look up at him with a mirthful grin as he calls him an ‘idiot’. That earns him a squeeze of the hand wrapped protectively around his waist and another light wheeze.

“Wait a second.” Clay moves against him and away from him slightly; George protests by trying to move himself closer again but Clay halts him with a hand to his thigh.

Not understanding and feeling a bit rejected, George starts to draw into himself and away from Clay’s warmth in both a literal and figurative sense, the bond’s flame wavering slightly until his soulmate rapidly moves to correct him, cupping his downcast cheeks.

“No, no, *baby*,” Clay’s voice is so soft it hurts; he drops a heart-warming kiss into George’s dark hair before he finishes, “I was just gonna ask why you’re not wearing my team’s colours...”

He tugs on the baby-blue fabric of his top for emphasis; George is truthful and admits in a bashful mumble that his day had been kind of a rush up until this point and that it had slipped his mind as he got dressed to follow the conventional colour scheme.

Clay tuts loudly, shaking his head dramatically. George watches him with slightly somber eyes as his soulmate untangles their limbs for a few seconds before he moves to dig into his hold-all he had apparently carried up the stands with him.

George is about to ask him what’s he’s doing when he catches a glance of the item that his soulmate removes and holds up before him: a dark green and white tracksuit hoodie, sporting not only the logo of Clay’s school’s team, but also his name too in small embroidered letters on the left side of its chest.

He’s a bit frozen when Clay casts the garment into his lap, barely stopping it from hitting the ground with the power of trapping it in between his thighs. Clay wants him to wear his team’s colours. Clay wants him to wear his *hoodie*. Fuck.

Looking over to Clay and receiving only eager urges that he puts it on, George moves quickly to slip the fabric over his head and finally blend in with the rest of the home crowd. The innards are soft and plush against his skin, and the scent smells so much like Clay that George thinks he just might have died and ascended into an eternal heavenly bliss. It smells like *home*.

“Better?”

He asks Clay as his head emerges from the pool of material bunched at his neck. Disoriented by his quick movements, he has to blink a few times in succession to regain his bearings. In this time, his soulmate does not share any words, but his emotions within are absolutely overflowing.

There’s a vast fountain of warmth that bursts to life suddenly within their chests, dancing displays of beautiful tandem as they intertwine together. Slyly, George pretends he doesn’t notice, even if his anticipatory feelings are respiring inside, looking up at Clay’s frozen face from under his dark lashes as he reaches out to caress his soulmate’s hands in his lap once again.

“I—,” George can’t help but grin as his seemingly impossibly talented soulmate is stumped to a loss of words, because of *him*, “Uh, yeah. Definitely better.”

George only gets to glance the very early beginnings of Clay’s blush until his coach is calling him back to the pitch. His soulmate shoots him an apologetic smile, although George knows he’d probably rather escape in this particular situation than stay; the thought makes him laugh.

He watches the shine of the large, white seven printed across his soulmate's back retreat further down the stands until he too is swallowed by the brewing crowd and the gathering darkening of clouds.

Then, there's suddenly a sharp succession of whistles that even George can tell the meaning of when it comes to American football.

The game is about to begin.

Clay's team are doing stupidly, ridiculously well, as expected because they have star quarterback Clay on their team, precisely throwing and catching his plays easily. They've pulled ahead massively in terms of scores and are basically guaranteed to have their place in the next round, but they keep on playing well anyway.

George's voice may be going a little bit hoarse from all of the shouting and cheering he's slowly become accustomed to along the way, but he doesn't care if it's for Clay, fuelling the strong, invincible feeling brewing in his heart of hearts.

Even from the stands, George can read the growing frustration and anger of the other team in the stiff and fixed way they begin to carry themselves as they move. He presumed they're wearing red, because he can't quite tell, the colour fittingly reflecting their rash actions right now. George can tell the tackles are becoming more brutal, barely legal and getting the referee involved more often than not. It doesn't alarm him too much until it happens, however.

His eyes are tracking Clay, because they're *always* tracking Clay, studying the well-practiced manoeuvres of his body as he sprints to receive the ball descending rapidly through the air. The beat of George's heart rises rapidly as it approaches the end of its arc, from both himself and his soulmate, he's sure.

The ball lands in his steady hands and George is about to shout out, celebrate, when a sudden stabbing pain hits him deep within his chest. All he sees is a flying flash of red as he doubles over in his seat and loses his vision of the pitch, partly from surprise but mostly from the reverberating ache echoing throughout the rest of his body. It breaks him. It breaks his heart.

Clay, is all he's thinking, *Clay*.

Unsteadily, he rises to his feet, nearly toppling himself over in his rush and making all the blood flow to his head. The bright floodlights blind his vision as he reopens his clenched eyes, glancing over the field frantically, searching.

He catches the aftermath. He hates it. There's a well-built and bulky red player removing himself off the grass of the pitch, off of *Clay*.

His soulmate's body is lying limp and unmoving near the sideline of the pitch, close to the bleachers. George's eyes are stuck wide, his limbs have stopped working, they won't respond to the screaming instructions of his brain to move and run to Clay. He can't breathe.

The sound around him is twisted, plunging him into silence before it suddenly returns in an explosive burst, hurting his ears. He sees Sapnap sprint over from his half of the pitch, dropping to his knees beside Clay's motionless form, grabbing ahold of his shoulders and vigorously shaking them.

He doesn't respond at all and George searches desperately for their bond, looking for warmth, love

and comfort. He's not there.

He's not there.

George's hands are shaking. This isn't right. Clay is *always* there for him. C- Clay's always-

Sapnap is getting held back by other members of his team. He's on his feet, helmet off and red in the face as he shouts angrily at the tall opposing player who's returned to himself to the swarm of red that's gathered just off to the side. George can't hear what he's saying, he can only hear shouting and see him point his finger accusingly.

His body still isn't moving. He can't bring himself to move his eyes away either, afraid if he does Clay will disappear from him altogether. His vision becomes soon blocked by the team of medics that were presumably on hand, seas of high-vis crowding his soulmate and ushering other people away.

George hears deafening cries of protest from behind him in the stands, people cursing the other team's clearly illegal tackle. They blur past him, however, as he can only continue to stare out and down at Clay, willing the breath back to lungs as he struggles, feeling winded.

There's a tug to his hoodie (*Clay's hoodie*, his heart says) that drags his frozen gaze finally away and to his right. Drista appears beside him, silently tugging George away and out of the stands, not saying much at all after she seems to recognise he's unable to speak.

One of his hands is cradled against him, holding the aching of his chest, trying helplessly to contain all of the emotions bursting their way out. He's following Clay's sister blindly as she pulls him around the back of the stands.

They still and George is finally finding his voice to ask what they're doing when Clay is out *there* and Clay is *injured* and *hurt* and George isn't by his soulmate's side, when he hears a loud ramble of voices approaching and the medic team suddenly rounds the corner.

Clay's on a stretcher. George's movements halt again but this time it doesn't matter because the first-aid team are soon placing him carefully on the floor and are quickly working diligently around him, conversing in whispers and hushes that George both wishes he could and couldn't hear.

His eyes roam his soulmate's form desperately and his heart rate is able to slow ever-so slightly as he can't see any blood, nor any too visible bruises for now. Clay looks more pale than usual and is way too quiet; he hates it.

There's a flurry of motion and a rise of sighs of relief as there's movement from behind Clay's eyes, lashes fluttering lightly, and that one small movement restores all hope and light to George.

A rushing warmth wells again with him, breaking though the gates of his heart like an unbounded wave and spreading to every inch of his body, all of the colours: the bright green of Clay's eyes, the blue of his soft hoodie, the beautiful sun-kissed tan of his cheeks.

His soulmate's presence returns, engulfing him in a blanket of comfort and allowing him to take a deep breath inwards at last. It's shaky and weak but gives him what he needs to walk over to Clay when he begins mumbling something to the kind-looking woman currently leaning over him, taking his temperature from his ear.

"I... George..."

He watches his soulmate take a breath in between, watches his chest rise up and down as it should.

Clay's words are barely a whisper, but he can hear them. No, he can *feel* them.

"Where's George?"

It's upon these words that he apparently finally breaks. The last log in a broken dam withholding his emotional response finally gives out, bringing stinging tears to his eyes, an anger at the one who could do such a thing to his soulmate, and residual biting worry.

"I'm here — C-Clay, I'm here," He rushes the rest of the way to land on his knees uncomfortably beside where his soulmate is laid. There's warm patchwork on his heart as he gulps and swallows his tears, "Please. Tell me you're okay— tell me you're not—"

His soulmate is looking up at him with watery, green-lily eyes. Without breaking their gaze, George manages to find Clay's hand tucked down beneath his side and interweaves their fingers securely and tightly, warm and welcome, never letting go.

"The bond-," Clay chokes out between winded coughs, squeezing his hand tightly as his eyes are wide, concerned, "Are you hurt?"

George stares incredulously at him for a long minute, a whirlpool of emotions engulfing his heart and threatening to drag him down into its depths.

"Oh my God, you absolute *idiot*. YOU are the one who literally got tackled to the ground so hard you apparently passed out, and you're asking ME if I'm—"

He has to cut his words off to shake his head and rub his eyes with his free hand, coming away wet with slow tears. Clay's shadow of a grin appears at his outburst, but his brow is still furrowed as he asks again, "But... you're okay?"

His soulmate's eyes are soft and tender, vulnerable, as he tries to lean forwards towards George. The restraints on the stretcher stop him and Clay stares down at them with burning distaste.

"Y-yeah," George manages to breath shakily, still gripping on tightly to his hand and showing a slither of a brave smile, "Now I'm fine, yeah."

"Good."

It's with this resolute proclamation that Clay promptly passes out of consciousness again, head lolling back against the orange, plastic board. Clay's hand is still warm in his and he's so reluctant to let go that he has to be shooed away by someone so that his soulmate can be moved to the school's infirmary to lie down.

He's been impatiently waiting outside of the medical room for ten minutes, pacing the linoleum corridor and becoming more and more surprised that he hasn't worn holes into the floor yet.

The cushioned chair some nice woman had given him after he insisted he had to stay with Clay because he's his *soulmate* had become uncomfortable all too quickly. The unease of Clay's situation, even though he's been reassured that it's definitely nothing more than a mild concussion, still fails to sit right in his heart, making him antsy and jumpy.

When Sapnap hurriedly barrels into the corridor, slamming several doors behind him in his wake, George nearly jolts out of his skin. The younger man almost looks as distraught as George still feels.

“Where is he? Is he okay?”

Sapnap asks through frantic and panting breaths. George tries to answer as quickly as possible to relieve his anxiety, but it takes him a second to halt his repetitive pacing and stand next to the door.

“He’s- He’s in here,” He tells the younger with a nod in the direction of the shut door. His voice is still shaking, maybe so are his hands, he soon realises, “They said it should only be a couple of minutes before he comes round and they’ve done all their checks.”

The other man nods graciously at him with a hushed breath before he does a visible double take, obviously only just clicking as to who George is. He doesn’t say anything more about it for a while though; they sit themselves down on the chairs outside in silence, company seems to have helped George’s heartbeat quell somewhat, for which he is grateful.

“I’m really glad he has you, George,” Sapnap says after awhile, projecting into the echoey corridor instead of in George’s direction, studying the perforated ceiling, “Like, seriously,”

George turns to face him, listening intently and glad for the slight distraction from *waiting*.

“... Clay’s always put others above himself, even when he was little. God, he only got tackled because he cast himself in front of one of our smaller guys and took the brunt of it. Sometimes... I really think he forgets that he needs support and help too, you know?”

Watching with wide eyes, George suddenly realises that he *does* know. Clay’s always worrying over him, his sister, his close friends; when did George ever really hear that his soulmate had any concern over something for himself and himself only... never.

“I’m glad that you can be there to give that to him.”

Sapnap’s words bring the most warm and genuine smile onto his face that he’s felt in the past hour, breathless with the true sentiment behind his statements and the sincere glint in his dark brown eyes.

George is about to thank him, or something of equivalence, when there’s a click of the door opening that grabs both of their attentions quickly to their side.

They’re finally let in as the remainder of the medical staff file out, declaring that Clay had, at the most, suffered a nasty knock to the head and passed out for a few seconds; he has no concussion. Thank God.

“My two favourite people!”

Clay’s voice carries loudly around the room as they enter, George’s eyes widen alongside his growing blush, having expected a more exhausted Clay rather than delirious.

His soulmate’s eyes are brightly wide, body slightly leaned up in the bed that’s positioned towards the door.

“Oh, he’s had a light sedative for the pain,” One of the nurses warns him with a kind grin on the way out, “So he might be a slightly out of it for a bit, but he’ll come around properly after a good sleep.”

The door shuts lightly after her as both George and Sapnap approach Clay’s bed from different sides. Clay’s best friend looks all too enticed with the prospect of filming his friend’s deluded state, but first he asks lowly and carefully, “You feeling better, dude?”

George watches as his soulmate's bright eyes sparkle under the industrial lights and he grins toothily up at the other man.

"Never better."

The recovering man counters with a wink and a smirk, poorly coordinated but effective all the same.

"Oh, he's just fine."

Sapnap speaks through a badly suppressed grin and chuckle that George can tell he uses to mask his relief. George goes to make a comment, but then he looks back down at the bed to find Clay staring up at him with fond and gentle eyes and the words remain in his mouth.

Reading the interaction perfectly, Sapnap excuses himself from the room for a couple of minutes, allowing both George and Clay to recoup themselves and their bond. George shoots him a grateful smile as he goes; he receives a thumbs up in return which makes him emit a giggle.

"George," His soulmate's soft and solemn voice drags his eyes back towards him. Improvising quickly, he grabs a chair from the side of the room and pulls it close next to where Clay lays on the bed. He leans in closer to hear Clay finish when he beckons him forward, "Have I ever told you how pretty you are?"

Who knew that when Clay is drugged up on painkillers he'd gain the ability to make George blush even worse than normal, his cheeks erupting into a volcano of reds and pinks as he pulls his face back slightly from Clay's where he's leaning over the side of the bed.

His soulmate's hand appears beside George's face and it takes a few attempts but Clay is soon cupping the blushed flesh of his cheek with a feather-like touch. Afraid he'll break.

"I— I don't think so..."

At least not explicitly. He wants to add, but holds his lip by biting it in between his teeth; Clay's eyes follow the motion before flicking back upwards to look into George's.

"Well, I should say it more," Drugged-up Clay declares, hitting the duvet over him lightly with his free fist, "I think it all the time."

"You do?"

His words are barley whispers. His soulmate nods at him surely in return, causing George to nervously bite on the inside of his cheek before he makes a quick decision and brings his head forwards to meet Clay's.

He plants one single precious kiss onto his soulmate's lips, sweet enough to leave tingles spreading down both of their spines that arrive eventually in their hearts. Watching Clay's reaction as he pulls back, he catches the immediate grin that springs onto his face and the caress of his large fingers that still hover over his cheekbone.

"Can I tell you a secret?"

Clay mumbles into the small amount of space between their heads; foreheads resting serenely against each other. George nods against him, eyes shut and resting in the peaceful darkness he finds there, the lack of movement and bustle and an omnipresent warmth, "Sure."

“I lied earlier,” His eyes peek open a little at that, waiting patiently for the rest as he listens to Clay’s therapeutically rhythmic breaths, “*You’re* my favourite person, Georgie.”

Slowly, George drags one of his hands up from where it’s been resting against his soulmate’s clothed chest to meet the naked plane of skin on his neck, touching gently.

“Really?”

He asks, even though he already knows the answer from the growing blaze within him.

“*Really*, really,” Clay tells him seriously, bringing their lips back together again in a lingering and tender kiss that makes George want to melt on the spot, “*Shhh*, don’t tell Sapnap I said that though.”

He glances a look over George’s shoulder and towards the door where they both know the younger is waiting patiently. George can’t help emitting a light cackle of a laugh into the empty room at his soulmate’s words and apparent current concern.

“Okay,” He promises, bringing Clay’s mouth to his again because he can never possibly get enough and his soulmate is just so damn *adorable*, “I won’t tell him.”

Satisfied look gracing his face, Clay pulls back slightly to tap the space on the bed next to him with an inviting glance. George understands and swings his legs up to lay down next to his soulmate, faces in close proximity due to the massive lack of room on the small and rickety single bed.

George is connecting all the constellations in his soulmate’s freckles splaying across his golden cheeks when he finds the urge to relay the sentiment.

“You’re my favourite person too.”

He admits with a shy smile, earning a dazzling grin from Clay and a look of sheer, unmasked adoration before he’s pulled by strong warm arms into an intimate kiss that has them clutching on tightly to one another, bond brimming with elated emotion as everything falls back into place.

Perfect, and exactly where it’s meant to be.

Chapter End Notes

still not sure exactly how long this fic will be but i’m definitely sure we’re over halfway in now! further updates to come on length in the future :))

i also recently added chapter titles to this fic! absolutely nothing else has changed tho, so don’t worry

ily guys a lot♡

petrichor

Chapter Summary

George has a bad dream, Clay makes it better.

Also, George's first visit to his soulmate's house (which is swiftly gatecrashed by someone rather familiar).

Chapter Notes

hellooo everyone

happy christmas eve! i hope you're all having wonderful days whether you celebrate or not :)

another long chapter for you all <3

hope you enjoy!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It's four am.

It's four am and Clay is standing in a dimly lit corridor, practically drenched from the heavy rain prevailing outside, and his heart is cascading deep down inside of his chest.

The feeling has been hanging over him ever since he was jolted out of his slumber about an hour ago in his bed at home. His body was covered in perspiration despite the relentless rainfall pounding the planes of his window, humidity ever-clouding the air, as his eyes had snapped suddenly open into the darkness of his room.

He'd taken a moment to rebalance his bearings, focusing on the ground of the bed beneath him and the dull, natural light creeping in from behind his curtains. Lying there, he'd taken a good few minutes to ponder over why he'd been so suddenly ejected from his sleep, where his dreams had been dancing in pools of softness and light and centred around a very specific person. He was struggling to produce a valid conclusion in his fatigued state until it happened again.

The crushing feeling in his chest, like he was slowly imploding inwards, becoming smaller and smaller until he would undoubtedly disappear.

He'd sat up straight in his bed after that in alarm with only one thought, *George*.

Without a second thought he had swooped his keys off of his bedside table and was pulling socks and shoes onto his feet, not caring too much about his outfit of simple joggers and a random hoodie, and escaping out of the door of his house and into the rain.

It was warm, despite everything. Despite the churning sensation within Clay's chest.

Once he had made it to his car, slamming the driver's door shut and pushing the wet tips of his hair back and out of his face, Clay had decided with a little ease to his heart that it didn't feel like George was in *pain*. At least, not physically.

George had relayed his experience to him, after much reluctance and persistence on Clay's part, of his football injury a couple of days ago. He knew what that felt like. He knew how horrible it was for George for him to feel like his *soulmate* was gone, far away and out of reach, and he hated it.

Clay hopes to God that's he's right, but he's pretty sure that his soulmate was merely dreaming. Something unpleasant at that, but it was a massive relief to Clay's frantic heart to know that he's not in immediate danger; that he can be with him soon and try to help make it all go away.

He'd pulled off of the drive with nothing in mind apart from a destination and an aching within to wrap his soulmate up in his arms, hold his body close against him and breathe in the comfort of his scent.

They'd been on a call only a few hours before Clay had been stirred again. One where Clay was just waiting for the inevitability of George falling asleep on the call first and being able to listen to the steadiness of his breaths, as well as the calm and serenity that accompanies them. He'd whispered sweet nothings, scrawled them across his skin and received a rush of blood to the surface of the skin at each soft and sincere word.

It felt very different now, like his soulmate's breaths are hurried and near gasps for air, struggling against a dragging tide. With the heavens pouring down on him, Clay drove quickly, but not carelessly, well aware that he'd be of no help to George at all if he never made it to him. His hands were sweaty and sticky against the steering wheel, his grip only tightening when the pressuring feeling on his heart didn't relent, only swirling within like a storm.

Upon arrival at George's dorm building, one which he now probably spends more time visiting than not, Clay had practically leapt out of his car from the car park and dashed through the revolving glass doors. As he was finally forced to stop moving so fast, he took the opportunity to catch some of his breath in the elevator up, although he's not sure all of it feeds into his lungs, chest feeling tight and restricted still.

That leaves him here. In front of George's front door. It's still four am. He's still dripping water all over the dark carpet and slicking his wet hair back against his head. And he's still suffering under the heaviness of his chest and other dragging limbs.

He knocks on the hard wood of the door, right hand shaking but the sound still being emitted firm and loud. Clay doesn't care about waking up other people in this moment, all he cares about is-

"George."

Clay states, eyes wide, as his soulmate appears behind the obstruction of his door sooner than he thought he would.

Peeking his head cautiously round the corner at first, George soon holds the oak wood ajar fully when he recognises his visitor to be Clay. Even if he is soaked to the bone.

Raking his eyes frantically over his soulmate's form, Clay is massively relieved to be able to eliminate physical injury almost immediately, although an inkling still bugs at his stomach.

George stands before him, head leaning upwards slightly to regard his soulmate's face even though his eyelids appear so heavy that they're practically pulling back together as he attempts to remain

standing. The shorter man's face is pale; Clay can see the tiredness in the skin under his eyes, tinted grey.

The other brings a clothed wrist to wipe at the sleep and grogginess in his eyes and makes Clay realise that George is wearing his *hoodie*, the one that he had lent him to wear on the day of his last football match and one that Clay had honestly not wanted to ever take back after seeing his soulmate practically drown in the green material.

The fabric hangs on George's skinny frame loosely, sleeves easily falling well past his hands and bunching heavily at his wrists and waist. Clay was definitely going to say something, but the image before him seems to have made him forget exactly what, occupying all corners of his mind and leaving his mouth hanging slightly open in a stupid way.

"... Clay?"

George's voice sounds lower and sleepless, the syllables hoarse in his throat and catching like thorns.

"Are you okay?" He blurts out, only just realising how desperate and drowned his tone sounds, "The- I kept feeling through the bond- it woke me up- it felt like my heart was going to explode."

His eyes are focused and fixed on George's as he finishes, however, his soulmate soon ducks from his gaze. Clay's feet drift him closer to him, but he waits patiently, not knowing what the shorter wants or needs.

"Oh," George's voice is smaller now, reserved and within himself. Clay becomes quickly confused when he feels himself unable to delve deeper into his soulmate's feelings, having become so used to sharing it all, "I- I was having a bad dream..."

Closer now, Clay uses his hand to tilt George's chin upwards to face him and judge the wateriness of his deep, brown eyes. Upon first sighting, he immediately moves and tugs George's warm body into his chest, engulfing him in a crushing hug and holding him there.

"It's okay now,"

He whispers lightly next to his soulmate's ear, heart rate finally depleting a little now that his suspicions have been confirmed and he feels George's body relax and go limp against him, leaning heavily into his warmth.

"It's okay."

Continuing his reassuring whispers, Clay makes a decision as he wanders them both into George's apartment and quietly shuts the door behind them, never letting go of his grasp on his soulmate in the meantime, slowly feeling his heart rise out of deeper and darker waters into the sunny shallows that sparkle and gleam.

Clay walks them both slowly into George's bedroom, all too familiar with the layout of the apartment as he pretty much visits everyday if he can as it's harder for George to reach him with no car and a mountain of coursework to keep up on.

When he squints into the dimly-lit room, Clay can see the disarray of the sheets, thrown in all directions and spilling over onto the floor as if they had been cast away. The sight makes his heart ache, but he tries his absolute hardest not to present it in anyway to his soulmate, as he's still burying his face into his neck and Clay can feel the dried remnants of tears against his hot skin.

Leading George to sit down carefully on the edge of the bed, Clay unwillingly extracts himself from his embrace for mere seconds to cross the room to the window overlooking the lawn of the university campus and open it.

There's a pleasant rush of slightly cooler air that floods into the humidity of George's room and allows them both to breathe more freely without feeling slightly suffocated by the heat. The merciless rain seems to have abdicated its reign, giving way to fresh petrichor that now engulfs all walls of the room.

When he turns back to face George he openly stares, transfixed. The moonlight streams in from the now unobstructed glass panes and glitters mesmerisingly in his eyes as it illuminates the paleness of his skin, patches of stars on earth.

His body moves by itself as it carries him over to his soulmate once again, leading him to bring a gentle hand up to his face once more and wipe at the collection of tears still threatening to fall. George lets out a sniffle with a strained smile directed his way.

Once he returns all the sheets and covers, the bed looks inviting and warm so Clay heaves himself up to sit against the headboard as he motions for George to follow, holding open his arms wide for him to fall into.

George snuggles up so close against his side that Clay is convinced he can feel the steady beat of his soulmate's heart against his chest, as well as being able to feel the warmth and comfort that is slowly seeping back into him, chasing away the internal fear and frustration that had welled within.

Clay strokes the back of his dark hair as he speaks; in this new position, the moon covers both of them in a blanket of pale blue.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Silence persists but Clay can feel George giving his words consideration, so he waits, hands still carding through the soft locks of his hair.

"You don't have to," He begins to add, flicking his green eyes down towards the top of his soulmate's head, almost willing that he could see directly inside and swiftly eliminate every dark and negative thought before they can take root to fester and grow parasitically, "I just think it might help."

One of George's hands works its way across Clay's chest to rest over one of his soulmate's larger ones. Clay takes his palm into his light grasp immediately and intertwines their fingers, holding his soulmate's eyes when beautiful coffee-brown darts upwards to look at him.

Clay only deepens his gaze as he brings them upwards and places a light kiss onto the back of George's hand as he smiles sweetly and reassuringly with a light inclination of his head in his soulmate's direction. He hopes they both know what he means.

"I- uh-"

Stopping and starting a couple times more, Clay can feel the frustration welling within George so he whispers softly to him to take all the time he needs; he's not going anywhere.

"You- you know how my parents are divorced... right?"

Clay nods his head slightly, his chin bumping lightly into the top of his soulmate's head and

tickling his skin with the fluff of his hair. They had spoken a lot about their lives and their families in the very early days of them meeting; Clay being all too excited to share stupid stories of his sister or minor misdeeds he had engaged in when he was younger.

But Clay has always noticed, when it comes to the topic of families, that George never really offers up any amusing stories of his own that have stuck in his mind, melded through nostalgia. He'd originally marked it down to his lack of siblings, or perhaps George being a quieter child than he was in his youth, but Clay very suddenly draws the connection that maybe it's because he doesn't want to remember it at all.

His heart physically clenches in his chest, muscles tensing involuntarily alongside this and freezing the actions of Clay's hand in his soulmate's hair.

George's breath hitches at his movements too, bringing his wide eyes back up to glance at him. Clay can only offer solemn eyes in return as he says, "Yes."

"Well... uh-" Clay can feel the pressure pushing up against their hearts, he resumes his original calming administrations against George's hands and hair and smiles when he feels the weight ease a little, "There's more to the story... than what I told you."

Listening intently, Clay reflects on what he already knows and remembers George telling him that his father had walked out on him and his mother to be with someone else mere months before his eighteenth birthday.

He had felt the pent up anger and resentment at that time shimmer through him; Clay figures that George definitely hasn't seen much of his father since, and definitely probably doesn't want to.

"My mum and dad, they were *soulmates*,"

George lets his revelation hang in the air, breaths falling slowly against Clay's collar bone.

"My mum and dad were *soulmates* and he still did what he did to her. Left her with nothing and broke not only her heart, not only their bond and promises to each other, but her spirit too."

Clay takes a shaky breath, unsettling George on his chest who quickly moves to latch himself more closely onto the other's body. He'd never presumed, about the status of George's parents; the world being as vast and wide as it is now and even with the veil of fate that seems to guide most soulmate pairs together, people don't always meet at the right place, right time.

Many couples these days consist of non-soulmates, a topic which had been considered taboo previously in the past but that has now become more socially acceptable. Furthermore, many people lose their soulmates to an untimely death and seek refuge in those who have suffered the same horrible fate.

Clay can't stand the idea even floating into his brain: that one could possibly be so callous to their soulmate, the one who is perfect for you, fits you in every way and balances you out in the weight of the universe. The thought is acidic in his mind; Clay can't even begin to imagine what George must have suffered at the time. He presses his lips to the top of his soulmate's head as he goes on.

"She- uh, she was a mess," George sighs painfully, taking a deep breath in, "For months and months. And all she had was me."

Clay clutches their hands together more tightly.

"I felt so helpless... so- so *useless* for a long time. That I couldn't do anything to help... to make her

pain go away.”

The rain continues to hit the window lightly, filling the silence in the room with delicate patters.

“I’m so sorry, George,” He tells him softly, holding their hands back up to his mouth and mumbling the words again and again against them, “That’s what your bad dream was about?”

George twists himself round in his embrace to face him more easily, Clay lets him by loosening his grip.

“Not exactly,” His soulmate breathes out, the sound becoming choked towards the end too, “I thought that you...”

There’s a prickling feeling spreading at the back of his neck. Melancholy and hesitation. George intakes a huge breath, eyes watery again.

“I *dreamt* that you left me. That you... didn’t want me anymore.”

Clay has no words to describe the protests that battle to fight out of his lungs at the suggestion, at the idea of something that he’s sure would shatter him to pieces if he were to even attempt.

“I would never,” He takes a heavy breath in, “*could* never leave you baby, you know that right?”

He doesn’t know when or why he had started doing that, calling George ‘*baby*’. It had slipped from his lips the first time, wholly on accident, but when he had been left basking the the reddening warmth that the pet name had induced inside his soulmate, Clay has taken a specific liking to using it and for using it mainly to cheer George up when he can feel his frustration or anxiety. Much like now.

George’s eyes flick back onto his, after having dropped when detailing the aspects of his bad dream. The fondness in his soulmate’s eyes, the shimmering sensations like the summer sun that stream over him and his heart tells Clay that he *does* know. George knows Clay will stay by his side through it all, will always *want* him.

It’s just the residual shadows from the sufferings of his late past that cast unreasoned doubt into his mind; Clay can feel George’s frustration at the fact that such a thing has occurred and quickly constructs a plan to eject his soulmate out the self-criticism undoubtedly clogging his mind.

“Don’t ever be sorry for how you feel, George.”

He reminds him gently as he cups the soft skin of the older’s cheek and swiftly removes the pearls of tears pooling at the corners of his eyes.

“I know,” His soulmate whispers into the air between them, but his slight grimace shows that it’s easier said than done, “I know you’d never-“

George can’t bring himself to even say the final word, apparently, as he cuts himself off with a sigh, leaning into Clay’s hand. The younger offers a slight grin as he feels the clouds within his heart appear to begin to clear and encourages his soulmate to lay his head back against his chest so that they can ‘get some sleep, at least’.

His soulmate relents with a hum as he does so, Clay threads his hand into the back of his hair again which makes George push back against it and hum again encouragingly. Clay huffs out a small laugh.

They lie idly, curled up against each other for around an hour, the rain against the panes of the open window providing static white noise in the background. Clay's brain won't let him fall asleep. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that he drove here, waking him up, or maybe it's to do with the protective urge nuzzling into his mind, wrapping his arm around George's waist, pulling him more tightly against his chest.

He thinks George's breaths have evened out, though he can't really tell with the noise of the rain. Clay glances down to watch the face of his soulmate as he sleeps peacefully, as he should be always allowed to, and trails his eyes across the slight furrow of his dark brow, down to the scatterings of light freckles around his nose that have began to appear under the Floridian sun, and finally across his Cupid's bow and the pink of his lips, where small puffs of air rhythmically escape.

George looks ethereal under the light of the moon. Clay finds himself thinking that for the second time tonight already. His soulmate is just so unfairly *pretty* at all times, but especially when he's cuddled up to Clay like this, clutching his hands into the soft fabric of his shirt.

Clay had been informed by a rather giddy and mischievous George only yesterday that he'd told his soulmate exactly that whilst still recovering from the effects of his painkillers. The teasing had been relentless, but it only took a couple of minutes for Clay to shut him up by kissing him senseless to hide the growing red on his own cheeks.

The melody of the weather outside catches his attention again when there's a loud resurgence in the pace of the rain. When it rains in Florida, it rains hard.

Out of the corner of his eye, as he stares out of the window across the room from them, Clay notices a single black biro situated on the bedside table nearest him, presumably left there for the same reasons he keeps one beside his bed. The thought makes him smile widely.

An idea flashes into his mind, quickly taking hold and forming roots, as he slowly and strategically slips his hand away from George's and retrieves the pen from where it lies alone.

He then also reclaims his left arm from George's hold carefully, lying his soulmate's head further down on his abdomen without stirring him, and uncaps the pen with his teeth.

Their arms are currently both blank, words of the day washed away by the shower Clay had taken before going to bed the evening before. They don't fill as much space as they used to, back when that was their only means of communication and their words were forced to spill over onto their other limbs and be cramped into small and tiny spaces.

A grin leaps onto Clay's face when recalling their first few conversations. The nerves, the worry, the hope. Now he holds this man, his *soulmate* in his arms. The gravity of the thought still manages to allude him, convinced that one day he'll wake up again on his eighteenth birthday because this is all way too good to be true.

He fiddles with the pen, rolling it easily between his fingers as he does when he's trying not to fall asleep in class. Soon, the pen is brought to the inside of his left arm, writing and writing, bearing his soul before finally starting to feel the beginnings of sleep sweep over him.

I'll never leave you, He writes, I need you more than you can think, more than you know.

I love you.

That's what he wants to say but can't quite yet bring himself to write.

George, I love you.

~

"When's George coming again?"

His mum asks for the umpteenth time over her shoulder as she rushes around the house, frantically packing last minute things into her handbag. She's digging into a drawer in the lounge as Clay replies with the same answer he's been giving all day since he revealed he invited him over.

"About twelve, we said we might make lunch together or something."

She gives him the widest smile as she finally finds what she was looking for in the drawer and looks up. Both his parents have been super excited and eager to meet George since he'd touched down on American soil, but Clay had thought it best to at least give his poor soulmate a few days to settle in before exposing him to his parents' good intentions and enthusiastic questions.

"It's such a shame- We'll just miss him on our way out!" His mum complains, shuffling her bags on her arms and pushing up her sunglasses on her head, "Anyway, you know the drill, we'll be back around two pm tomorrow or so if your sister's competition doesn't run over ridiculously long like last time."

She gives him a roll of her eyes, but he knows she loves watching Drista compete in her track races. She's a long distance runner and has been since the sixth grade; athleticism seems to run in his family.

Clay often attends as many as he can, eager to cheer her on as she battles for regional titles and the like, but not so much when it's cross-state and it means staying in a hotel overnight. His parents also like him to look after the house and Patches, so, this time round he's staying put and has invited George to keep him company.

"Yeah, I know."

He drawls, having gone through this process for years already.

"Good," She says, hands on her hips as she checks her bags once more. When she glances back over to Clay, where he's currently positioned lazily across the sofa, her gaze softens and slows, "I'm so happy for you, honey."

Clay merely smiles toothily because he knows he's already shared the most important details with his parents (and he's sure going MIA and returning home the next day in the late afternoon after meeting George surely has its implications too).

"Thanks, mum."

He mumbles sincerely as she walks over to drop a kiss onto the top of his head and finally announces her departure, prompted by the honk of a horn outside.

Before she closes the door, however, she shouts back into the house, "Make sure to tell George I

said hi! And that he's invited for dinner whenever he wants! And that I'll make his favourite... whatever it is."

Clay simply laughs her off with a wave, which he receives enthusiastically in return back and moves to the large window positioned at the front of their house to watch his dad pulling away in their grey minivan, shooting him a wide grin and a thumbs up too.

He can't see Drista through the back windows as the car disappears around the corner of their suburban street and the coughs of the engine fly off into the distance. He does feel his phone buzz against his leg in his pocket, however.

11:46 *don't scare him off, idiot*

11:46 *i like george more than you*

Clay scoffs at the texts, sending back a quick '*fuck u :)*' but catches the sentiment behind them and grins to himself.

To his knowledge, his soulmate and his sister had gotten quite close whilst he suffered his short recovery from his injuries with a couple visits to the hospital over the following days to make sure he was definitely okay. He's really glad that two of the people that mean the most to him seem to get on well with each other.

Bored and waiting impatiently for his soulmate's arrival, he distracts himself for a couple of minutes, flicking on the sports channel on the TV before soon turning it back off again, telling himself that he's not just waiting to hear a knock at the door.

His eyes flick downwards to the expanse of his arms; it's only eleven am and they've already filled the space there today with an hour long argument about the number of Pokemon. Because Clay may or may not have thought there were only thirty-nine and George had then proceeded to lecture him on the culture he had missed out on as a child.

Clay had sat there on his bed, Patches purring happily in his lap as he sat cross-legged for ages, content in simply watching his soulmate's cute ramblings print across his skin because he was trapped in the middle of lecture and couldn't call to talk at the time.

He traces each sentence with his eyes, each one almost carrying an emotion of its own in remembrance. His own warmth is extending throughout his body from his heart, suddenly making him hot under the fabric of his hoodie.

During his movements to remove said item, however, he suddenly feels a prickling at the back of his neck, slightly uncomfortable and running down his spine and a numbness in his mind. He stops for a second, almost feeling dizzy, when three knocks on the door resound around the house and attract his attention.

Oh, He thinks, hand automatically reaching to the nape of his neck to rub there. Clay's mouth quirks upwards a little, *George is here... and George is nervous.*

Clay wastes no time in reaching the door, bounding over excitedly and thinking exactly of what George had previously told him he reminds him of: a golden retriever.

"Hey."

He greets immediately as he opens the door with a dazzlingly wide grin, holding it still in his hands and slightly leaning against it, not really knowing what to do with them. Truthfully, he becomes

very easily sidetracked in his mind as well because George is wearing a dark blue crewneck with a white shirt underneath and he looks- he looks-

“Hi.”

George says breathlessly with a small and shy smile, craning his neck upwards slightly in the way that allows him to meet Clay’s eyes. *Fuck.*

He’s forgotten about what he wants to say, so he asks, “Why are you nervous?”

His soulmate brings his shoulders upwards, alongside an expression that involves him pursing his lips. He shuffles a little on his feet, side to side, before he answers.

“I don’t know,” George answers honestly with a breath of a giggle, darting his eyes away from Clay’s momentarily before tracking them back and fiddling with his fingers where his hands are currently grasped, “It’s just, we’re at your house... together. It feels important or something I suppose.”

Adoration bubbles up within Clay and spreads across his face into a large smile as George attempts to avoid his eyes again. He shuffles himself closer on his doorstep, towards the shorter man, before he takes his restless hands into his own and holds them gently.

When George looks up at him questioningly, Clay simply closes the gap between them with a kiss. The nettlesome sensation at his neck subsides almost immediately, falling away into a blank and white calm, like a still sea. George’s taste is sweet against his lips.

When he pulls away, George has a set grin on his face and his cheeks are blooming a familiar light pink. Clay rubs the backs of his hands where they’re still intertwined with his own.

“Let’s get inside.”

He suggests. George agrees with a quiet nod and by moving to follow the taller over the threshold, bumping into Clay’s chest and making them laugh together as they go.

They make homemade pizzas for lunch. Clay had already bought the bases, leaving them only to decide what kind of toppings they want, which George insists is ‘cheating’ through chuckled laughs.

Together they chop up various vegetables as they very seriously argue over whether pineapple is a thing that belongs on a pizza. Thankfully for them both, they both agree that it does not.

“God, the soulmate thing really does work, huh?”

He jokes as a result as George is putting the finishing touches of mozzarella on his base and Clay is washing his hands, having already finished his own and laid it on the tray ready to go in the oven.

When he turns back around, he finds George looking at him, considering, with his top lip slightly caught between his teeth. There’s a low electric current running through his veins.

“What?”

Clay laughs, drying his hands on the kitchen towel. His soulmate’s eyes only continue to gleam up at him more before he shakes his head and turns back to face his pizza.

“Nothing.”

Clay hears him mumble, with an broadening and heart-melting soft grin spreading across his face. George probably thinks he can't see from where he's standing, Clay realises, but he can. It isn't until he thinks about what he said and did deeper, however, that he recognises what has happened.

He's never used the word soulmate in front of George before.

And it may not sound like much at all, but the way that sparks had flown into his chest, engulfing it into hopeful embers, when the words had slipped from his mouth suggests that it means a whole lot to George. So it matters to him too.

Tracking his soulmate's movements at the kitchen counter where he's still rearranging the presentation of his toppings, Clay can't stop his feet from moving as he makes his way over to stand behind him and wraps his arms carefully George's waist once he's not holding anything sharp.

The shorter man freezes for a couple of seconds, surprised, before he sinks into his soulmate's embrace and visibly resists throwing his head upwards to catch his green and mischievous eyes. He'd been humming along to the radio station they'd stuck on in the background of their cooking; George resumes again once his body relaxes.

"What are you doing?" George asks.

It's not a complaint by any measure, so Clay rearranges his grip as he speaks and dares to rest his chin on the top of his soulmate's head.

"Hugging you."

He answers simply and truthfully with a shit-eating grin on his face and his hands splaying against the soft woollen fabric of George's jumper. Said man lets out an incredulous and giggly laugh.

"I can see that," Once he's positioned his pizza on the tray next to Clay's he manages to spin himself around in their embrace to face Clay's proud gaze, "I'm not sure if it's the best time for that right now, though."

"Never a wrong time."

Clay counters quickly, shutting George up into protesting laughs by pulling him fully against his chest. As he manages to duck himself finally out of Clay's grip, he reprimands him with a feigned glare and a light poke to his side, making Clay squirm.

"*Ha*, I know all your weaknesses," George proclaims victoriously with a staggering grin and happily scrunched-up eyes, "Don't even try it. Just let me put the bloody pizzas in the oven."

Only continuing to still grin challengingly at his soulmate, Clay easily relents with the surrender of his hands from George's waist up and into the air by his chest. George *does* in fact know most of his most ticklish areas of his body by now that are often rudely exploited by the other man, also, to get his own way, even though Clay would always be more than happy to relent. Either way, he doesn't want to test his soulmate any further.

"Fine," He relents with a childish pout, one that he can feel makes George shine with pride, "Let me do the oven though and you can grab the drinks."

George agrees easily, disappearing across the room to clink about the the cupboards Clay had shown him earlier. As he places the pizzas into the oven and carefully sets the timer, Clay finds himself soon mumbling the words to the over-played catchy song on the radio.

“Uh... Clay?”

He twists round on his feet to follow his soulmate’s voice, finding him glancing over at him sheepishly.

“Mmm?”

“I-,” George sighs defeatedly like he knows he’s about to be teased and looks away, “I can’t reach the top shelf for the glasses.”

Clay feels an easy smile slide onto his face, a product of fondness and his obvious advantage of height over George. He likes feeling needed, apparently.

“It’s okay,” He reassures him as he joins him by the sink and picks the glasses they need off of the shelf and shuts the cabinet door, “I’ve got you, baby.”

He sees George roll his eyes and hears him emit a tut from his lips, but he *feels* the emotion blooming within his chest erupt in an explosion like a sunny crocus and elation spread into every inch of his body at the pet name he uses.

It makes Clay grin smugly; George stands up on his tip-toes and smothers it with a kiss to make him shut up before he has anything else to say.

Their pizzas are going to take a good thirty minutes to cook all the way through, so they settle themselves on the couch in the lounge in the meantime.

Checking his phone with half-attention, Clay belatedly notices a message from Sapnap that he still hasn’t answered from this morning. He’s about to do so when George speaks, throwing his head back against the cushions of the couch as he complains, “God, I’m so hot.”

Studying his soulmate’s face once he looks over, Clay can see the underlying warmth of red brightening his face. He also glances over George’s delicate features: mesmerising brown eyes, perfectly sloped nose and kissable red lips, before he answers purposefully.

“I know.”

He wheezes loudly in glee and amusement after George whips his head around to face him so quickly Clay almost could’ve sworn he heard a snap; leaving his soulmate even more crimson in the face as he watches him bring a feeble hand up to attempt to cover it.

“*Shut up,*” He giggles out through breathless and incredulous laughs, “I’m taking my jumper off.”

Clay watches George struggle for quite a few seconds, attempting to shift the material over his head to no avail before he asks if he wants help, to which his soulmate flatly and reluctantly agrees, “Fine.”

Once he’s slid himself across the couch to be even closer to George, however, he reaches out his own hand to catch the bottom of the jumper’s fabric and at just that moment, George shifts against him.

He feels it. They both do. He knows it.

Because they both pause immediately, leaving Clay’s fingertips still brushing up against the pale,

exposed skin of George's side where it's become unveiled through his undershirt riding upwards.

This touch... just one touch is electrifying. Like lightning striking their very bones, carried through them from head to toe as Clay's fingers grace a brand new area of his soulmate's skin they haven't had the pleasure of exploring just yet.

There's a muffled sound and George's head soon reappears from the tangle of his jumper above. The rest of the navy blue fabric falls back down his torso, catching on Clay's arm where his hand has dared to remain, frozen and stuck in between taking a leap of faith and backing nervously away.

He watches his soulmate's eyes closely and anxiously, catching and holding the deep, dark brown gaze they cast towards him. There's golden flecks of surprise residing there, which is to be expected, but also a hint of something Clay fails to catch. Could it be... *curiosity*?

George's lips part ever so slightly, making the only sound that resounds in the gentle and tentative quietness of the room. Suddenly filled with invigoration by his soulmate's questioning gaze, Clay decides to make the jump and grasps more firmly onto George's waist and grazes his fingers lightly there.

There's a hitched breath and Clay flicks his eyes from the actions of his hand back up to George's face just in time to catch the movement of the Adam's apple in his neck bobbing up and down. His soulmate's breathing gets heavier alongside the feelings quickly bursting into flames in his chest, engulfing his body entirely.

Clay dares to move his fingers once more just to ignite the same reaction again, watching and feeling the blood rush to the surface of his soulmate's face, alongside his struggle for deep breaths of air. George's gaze dips down and he follows it familiarly to his own lips. Clay's eyes focus in on his soulmate's: plush and pink and gently bitten when he's concentrating hard or blushing under his own compliments, then he brings his gaze back up to George's eyes where they now lie thick and heavy.

His hand remains in contact with his skin, shooting tingles down his arm and up and down his spine statically, as Clay brings his head forwards and looks slightly down in order to maintain his soulmate's heated gaze. The beginnings and kindling of a roaring fire ready to spark into life.

Before he knows it, George is moving too, closer and closer and closer until there's mere centimetres between them. Clay's eyes are now shut, basking in the warmth the flames bring and using the grip of his hand on George's waist to bring his soulmate nearer to him, as well as attempt to ground himself in reality.

One of George's hands reaches for his thigh, resting there and applying pressure, presumably in order to balance himself as he leans over to meet him in the middle. Clay's body is ablaze, the ash from the flames licking at his feet and threatening to take him entirely, to abandon all control, to-

A loud sound halts both of their motions, enticing their eyes open as well in the process and making them both smile and stifle laughter when they're met with images of each other's faces so close. It's a couple of seconds before Clay remembers, hearing the sound again. A knocking.

George is still grinning up at him as he extremely reluctantly leans back from his soulmate and holds his gaze very steadily as he tells him, "I am literally going to *kill* whoever is at the door right now."

His cold and flat comment sends George backwards onto the couch and finally out of his reach as

he chucks his head back in laughter and just waves off Clay to go and get the door already.

Before he removes himself entirely, however, Clay swoops back downwards to capture George's lips in a hasty but heated kiss, causing his soulmate to hum happily against him and chase his retreat when he backs off slowly to leave.

Grumbling to himself as he goes, hating the feeling of the flames licking his insides gradually diminishing, he soon reaches the door and swings it open with a very exasperated expression gracing his face. His eyebrows raise significantly when he recognises who he sees.

“... *Sapnap?*”

“Hey dude!” The other man cheers happily and obliviously as he shoots him a grin, “I don't know if you've forgotten or what, but you said we'd go to the mall today, remember? I already tried texting you...”

Once he recovers from the initial mix of shock and frustration, Clay thinks back to earlier this week and responds, “I did?”

The memory suddenly finally hits him square in the face. Monday at lunch.

“Oh, *I did.*”

Sapnap's looking at him with a questioning grin and spark in his eyes that tells him he doesn't really care that Clay forgot, merely giving him an exasperated roll of his eyes before asking, “Well, are you coming?”

God. Clay's brain is processing things at half-speed. He stutters over his response.

“I- uh, well, here's the thing-“

“Clay?”

George's high tone carries throughout the echoey walls of his house and is soon repeated, getting closer before Clay sees him appear around the corner and join him at the door.

“What's taking so long? I thought that- oh.”

When George finally shifts his eyes away from Clay and catches the other man at the door, his words fall off. Nervously, his gaze refers back to his soulmate's for some sort of context but, unfortunately for him, even Clay has none.

“Oh,”

Sapnap soon echoes very suddenly after. Clay almost considers following up with an ‘Oh’ of his own just for fun, but decides against it as he faces this dilemma.

“Hey George!”

Sapnap finishes by greeting his soulmate with a kind smile and a wide-eyed look to Clay that reads something along the lines that he's surprised at George's presence.

“Yeah, um,” Clay begins his explanation eloquently, jostling in the doorway when he feels George's shoulder brush up against his own, “George and I were just making lunch...”

His friend nods his head slowly in understanding as he processes the information. Clay shuffles on

his feet and glances a quick look to George who's also alternating between looking at the two other men. He lets out a semi-audible sigh.

That's how he finds himself in this situation, pressed in between his two favourite people on the sofa in his lounge in front of the TV as they argue over what game they should play.

George had surprisingly welcomed Sarnap to join them with open arms, probably feeling a little bad that Clay had accidentally blown him off but insisting that's it's also because he wants to get to know him better. That revelation had made him grin ear-to-ear and made Sarnap bound happily into his house and land himself heavily on the couch.

They're scrolling through the games on his Nintendo Switch, which is currently linked up to the TV. Clay has been advocating for a few rounds of Super Smash Bros, but his mind is soon changed when George whines that he's never played before and will probably suck.

"Don't worry," Sarnap tells his soulmate as he continues to flick through their options on the TV, gaze unmoving from the screen, "Clay sucks too and he's been playing for *years*."

He feels slightly betrayed as George lets out a string of careless laughs, balanced only by the fact that he couldn't be happier his best friend and soulmate seem to click so well together.

Belatedly, he protests with a 'Hey!', but it's too late because Sarnap has already burst into fits of snickers too.

"Hey, what about some Sword and Shield?"

The words make Clay snap his gaze back to the screen because they sound too vaguely familiar for his liking. He groans as he catches sight of the largely displayed Pokemon logo on the TV, knowing what's coming before he can even turn to face George with a pleading gaze.

George looks and feels immensely smug as he glances past him to tell the other man on the couch, "Did you know Clay thinks there's only thirty-nine different Pokemon?"

Sarnap's gaze from the screen is finally drawn away at this, his eyes wide and disbelieving as he exclaims loudly, "Sorry, you thought there were *HOW MANY*?"

His green eyes fix a weak glare to his soulmate where he's giggling heartily against the arm of the sofa before he turns to face his best friend with a slight grimace.

"You literally *own* a Pokemon game, how could you even- ?"

"It's my sister's!" Clay protests loudly, bouncing up and down on the couch with the invigoration his action carries, "She plays on my Switch sometimes- I've never even played, I swear!"

Sarnap glances round him to shoot a look of utter disbelief to George who merely shrugs in return before continuing on with his laughter, wiping near tears from his eyes. There's a fizzy feeling that rises up pleasantly in Clay's chest despite the regret he's suddenly starting to feel at inviting his best friend to join them.

Sighing loudly, yet unable to suppress the grin broadening on his cheeks, Clay shakes his head and prepares to defend himself again when there's a loud beeping noise that erupts from the kitchen.

The three of them glance at each other for a few seconds, confused, before George leaps up off of

the comfort of the couch and yells with wide eyes of realisation, “The pizzas!”

Clay’s eyebrows fly back on his forehead as he jumps up and follows him into the kitchen. Upon inspection, they’d luckily caught them just before they’d passed the mark of inedible, having turned a questionably dark golden-brown.

They get Sapnap to lay the table as they cut their pizzas up; George tells the youngest of the three that he’s welcome to have a couple slices of his own if he wants and the other gratefully and excitedly accepts. Clay stares over at his soulmate on the other side of the kitchen and perhaps falls even deeper into the pool of feelings he’s recently been reluctant to name.

When they finally tuck in, Clay’s relieved to find the pizzas not only edible, but rather delicious too. The others make contented humming sounds that show they feel the same until all three of them are bursting into laughter again, making Clay have to reach for his drink that George had set earlier (after his help) to soothe the growing dryness of his throat.

“So,” Sapnap starts through a mouthful of pizza until Clay shoots him a disapproving furrow of his brow and he races to finish chewing before talking again, “What other games do you play?”

Clay glances to George, knowing Sapnap is directing his question towards him; his friend knows his likes and dislikes inside out by this point in their almost ten-year long friendship.

“Um, I play Minecraft, RuneScape sometimes.. oh and a lot of CS:GO.”

His friend’s ears practically perk up at that, eyes narrowing in with interest as he leans forwards across the table towards George.

“Really?” George nods with a grin on his face as he takes a bite of another slice of his pizza, some of the tomato sauce flicks onto his lip and Clay resists the urge to reach beside him and graze it off with his thumb until George’s tongue darts out quickly and does the job for him, “You any good?”

“Am I any good?” George repeats with a raised eyebrow and a growing smirk. *God, Clay finds it attractive when he does that*, “I’m probably the best player in the UK.”

Clay watches, amused, as Sapnap leans back in his chair and laughs freely at his hyperbolic claim.

“I’ll have to hold you to that sometime,” He chuckles as he chews on the food in his mouth (Clay gives up on trying to police that very quickly with a defeated sigh), “We should play.”

Feeling the happiness that stirs within George, Clay’s heart grows even fonder at the fact that his soulmate is so pleased to have gained his best friend’s approval. Not that Clay thought he’d have any problem with it anyway.

He turns his head towards George beside him at the table and gives him an encouraging grin, not so subtly grazing his hand against his soulmate’s under the table. He receives a pearly smile in return.

Sapnap, whilst not being the centre of attention, seems to have resorted to trying to chug his whole glass of water in less than five seconds. To Clay’s amazement, he does it and clinks it back down on the table only to complain loudly, “Clay never plays CS with me anymore. He says it’s ‘boring’.”

He uses his fingers as air quotes as he speaks to emphasise his point alongside a stubborn glare at Clay. Clay’s on his last crust, but pauses his motions before bringing it to his mouth, daring to take a quick glance in George’s direction where he already seems to have unluckily made the

connection.

“Wait... but Clay used to play CS with me all the time while I was still in the UK?”

His soulmate says his words slowly, but the accompaniment of a raised eyebrow tells Clay he can already figure out why. Meanwhile, Sapnap’s eyebrows are raising just the same, but with an incredulous dropping of his jaw, also.

Before either man can utter another word out, Clay stands from the table with his plate in his hand and exclaims, “Oh, look! We’ve all finished now, let me wash up the plates and then we can play the Switch.”

He doesn’t bother glancing at the others as he darts out of the dining room and into the adjacent kitchen, hearing the stirring of giggles filter out from the other room at his expense, making his face flush a wash of red.

Truthfully, he doesn’t find CS:GO at all as interesting as he used to, but back on those late nights when their few hours of free time overlapped, Clay would happily do anything George suggested in order to keep hearing his voice and feel the bubbles within from his precious giggles of laughter. Anything at all.

Once they’ve all helped clearing up in the end, they settle comfortably in the lounge, all deciding to spread themselves across the floor in order to create more room to sit together, and finally settle on playing good old Mario Kart (a game which Clay is actually very *good* at, thank you very much, despite what Sapnap claims.)

His skills, however, don’t seem to pay off as Sapnap uses a blue shell on him as he nears the finish line and surpasses him, taking first place.

The younger man whoops and shouts loudly in celebration, only just managing to drown out Clay’s protests calling him a ‘dirty cheater’. George is laughing profusely, leaning up against the couch and clutching his stomach; forming a strange mix of emotions within them alongside Clay’s current frustration.

George must feel it too as he catches his eyes when he looks over, and gives Clay an even broader grin than already is on show, shifting their legs closer together and brushing up the sides of their calves as Sapnap continues to bounce animatedly around the room yelling of his victory.

“Oh, come on,” Clay protests when his friend has finally quietened down, holding his gleeful gaze with flat eyes and a high voice of injustice, “That clearly doesn’t reflect on my ability- You only won because of the item! Not skill.”

Sapnap only lets out a maniacal laugh before answering in a whiny, teasing tone, “Oh, boo-hoo, I’m Clay and I can’t take loosing whaaa-“

Clay scoffs disbelievingly, only moving as far away as he has to from George to kick his friend in the shin with little force. The other’s gaze narrows challengingly as he moves his leg to strike in return, but instead of Clay’s shin, he catches the leg of the coffee table in front of them and causes the whole surface to shake.

All three of them pause at the loud sound, watching helplessly as all of their recently refilled glasses of drink shake. They’re about to emit joint sighs of relief when the glass nearest the edge topples slowly over and is only caught at the last second by George, who was closest, allowing a

small amount to splash onto his chest.

“*Sapnap!*”

Clay exclaims exasperatedly on his soulmate’s behalf, quickly reaching behind him to the table next to the sofa where he knows a box of tissues lays. He pulls three or four out and hands them to George, then does the same for himself and deals with the mess on the table. Luckily, for his sake, his mum’s beloved carpet has come away squeaky-clean.

“I’m *sorrerrrry*,” The youngest drawls out in slight alarm but shaded in protest, “I didn’t mean to!”

Clay is about to respond loudly again when George speaks up, the voice of reason, reassuring him it’s alright with a kind smile and a squeeze to Clay’s arm as he asks, “Do you have something I could change into?”

He motions to the large stain spread across the front of his sweater as he speaks, luckily it doesn’t appear too bad because of its dark shade of navy blue. Clay’s brain is working slowly as he nods and gives him the directions to his room upstairs, telling him to pick whatever he wants from his closet.

They hadn’t ventured upstairs together yet, Clay saving the tour for after their lunch or even a later date, but suddenly he’s very grateful for the way things have panned out; allowing his poor racing mind to become slowly accustomed to the idea of George in his *house* for one thing and then also in his *room*. He’s gradually coming to terms with the excitement of it all.

“Okay, I’ll be back in a minute then.”

George assures him with a flash of a grin before thanking him and disappearing into the corridor and fading out in noise as he scales the stairs.

Clay sighs when he turns back to Sapnap to find him glancing up at him with forlorn and apologetic eyes.

“It’s fine,” He reassures him with a pursed smile and a tilt of his head, “Don’t worry.”

Sapnap lets out a long sigh of exasperation, like he thinks he’s messed up royally.

“I just want your soulmate to like me.”

He admits in a small and uncharacteristically vulnerable voice, earning him a soft smile from Clay, seeing the timid boy from his childhood that he had once known.

“He does,” Clay tells him tenderly, clapping a hand onto his knee where he sits cross-legged, “I can feel it, remember?”

He gestures to his chest and finishes with a wink, which makes Sapnap laugh and snap out of his anxious state. As their low chuckles wind down, another connected thought soon enters Clay’s mind, one he was going to put forward to his friend anyway but just hadn’t expected it to happen today.

“You know how George has been here like a week, right?” His words being slightly more serious tone catches Sapnap’s full attention immediately, drawing his gaze away from the screen where he’s busy setting up the next race, “Well, uh, we haven’t really been on a proper, you know, *date* yet...”

The word he stresses comes out as more of a whisper, making him feel like a freaking thirteen-year-old gossiping about his crush in class.

“... we hang out all the time and do things, but I want to do something *special* for him.”

Clay doesn't even realise he's shifted his gaze away before he has to drag it back to his friend's face, which is splattered with a widening grin.

“You're coming to *me* for dating advice? Not even that, actually, *soulmate* advice?”

He scoffs before he replies, telling Sapnap it's not like he has a lot of choice in the matter because he's clearly his closest friend and the one he trusts the most. Those words leave Sapnap feeling visibly warm for a few seconds before he's replying.

“Well, there's lots to do around here really, I guess. There's the mall, the arcades, the cinema, the beach-”

With a sound of illumination, Clay cuts Sapnap off whilst displaying a bright and light grin. His friend was actually surprisingly helpful almost immediately, to which he gives Sapnap a pat on the back before he can even ask what he's done to help.

“You're welcome?”

Sapnap half-asks in a confused tone before just shaking Clay's strange antics off. The taller ensures him he'll explain more later, wary of George returning down the stairs and into the room at any minute and wanting to keep it a surprise.

They sit for the next minute in comfortable silence, side by side, until Sapnap speaks up, curiosity clear in his tone and with practiced words, like he's been thinking this question over for a while.

“What's it like?”

“Hmm?” Clay replies.

“Having a soulmate.”

Clay greets Sapnap's eyes with careful consideration and inquisitiveness before he answers, finding bright eagerness there. Before he responds, he decides to ask, “Why?”

Playing with his fingers in his lap, the younger takes his time to answer, clicking his tongue inside his mouth, as if he's unsure as to whether he really wants to say.

Sapnap is a year younger than him, but still in the same grade as him at school. When his family had moved to the area when Clay was eight and Sapnap was seven, their school at the time had drafted him into Clay's class, a happy coincidence, but merely because the grade below was already too full.

Clay thanks his lucky stars for that decision, though, unsure if he would have ever have had the pleasure of meeting his best friend in the whole world if it hadn't have occurred.

In a nutshell, however, this means that his friend is yet to reach his eighteenth birthday, it being in March next year, and consequently is yet to find out if his soulmate is already waiting for him on the other side.

They'd never really talked about Sapnap's soulmate, or his eighteenth, Clay realises once thinking

about it. Regretfully, he also starts to realise that maybe that was his fault, him being so caught up in the prospect of meeting his own soulmate and dragging Sapnap into his struggles instead of questioning him about his own.

He shifts his eyes back up to catch his friend's where they had fallen down under the weight of his regret. Sapnap must see the apology in his eyes because he smiles kindly at him and shakes his head slightly before he speaks.

"Well... uh, I- um,"

Clay gives him his full attention, suddenly thoroughly invested because he hardly ever hears his loud-mouthed friend stutter. He raises his eyebrows at him and Sapnap's eyes narrow in a '*Fuck you*' in return. Clay grins.

"I just wanted to know what it feels like, because I— well," He takes a breath and stares down at his twiddling thumbs rather than at Clay's face, "I think there's someone I like... and I- I just wondered if maybe it's possible to tell, you know, beforehand."

Clay's heart breaks a little bit for his friend at first, not being able to imagine the unfathomable agony of the unknown, of merely being able to *hope* and wait and see. In Sapnap's eyes, he's sure he thinks Clay's got it good, got it all figured out.

"Who?"

He finds himself asking, the curiosity and desire to lightly tease creeping steadily over him.

"Um, well, you know when you were injured and all loopy on drugs for like an hour?"

Clay rolls his eyes with a sigh because Sapnap is giggling at the memory. The thought reminds him Sapnap has *way* too many videos of him in that state for his liking, even though George had watched them with him sat beside him and called him 'cute'.

"Yes." He relents with a huffed and expectant breath.

Sapnap laughs more loudly before he talks again, "Yeah, well, once you were up and walking again and George had to leave, he got a ride, right?"

Clay nods, scrunching his brow because he honestly can't see where this is going.

"Uh, well *fuck*, I don't even know his name, but we were talking in the car park as we waited for you guys to say goodbye and stuff," Sapnap's eyes have become distant and far-off, in a land of swimming remembrance; Clay doesn't want to distract him so he stays silent, "H- He was really funny... and- uh, cute? I don't know, he made me laugh a lot and I felt so relaxed ... it felt *easy* with him,"

Sapnap scoffs and laughs at himself, finishing by shaking his head, "And I don't even know his name."

Clay watches him carefully, watches the picking of his nails at his fingers and the rushed intakes of his friend's breaths as he takes a sip of his drink to quench his thirst while he thinks hard. Surely not? Surely Sapnap doesn't mean-

"*Karl*? You're talking about George's friend... Karl?"

He watches Sapnap's eyes practically catch alight with interest as he leans and shuffles closer to

him.

“Wait, you know him? *George* knows him? He wasn’t just a freaking Uber or something?”

Amused, Clay studies his friend’s face as it visibly brightens, merging his hopefulness and regret into a grin.

“Yeah,” Clay tells him with a raise of his eyebrows, not wanting to cause him anymore mental strife, “He’s- uh, George’s best friend at his university, I think.”

Anyone who looks upon Sapnap’s face at that moment would think that it’s currently Christmas morning and that he’s found the largest present situated under the tree.

“Oh my God, so I-“

Sapnap’s excited and increasingly loud words are cut off by the creaking floorboards of George’s return to the living room. They both whip their heads around to the door situated behind them at the sound.

Clay has to bite his lip to escape the noise that wants to clamber out of his throat, fireworks exploding neatly in the space of his chest.

George is standing in the doorway to the lounge. His navy-blue sweater has been replaced with one of Clay’s, much larger and longer on his soulmate’s slender frame, practically engulfing him in the soft and thick red material. The flash of bright colour contrasts beautifully with his pale skin, painting it porcelain.

Just when Clay thinks he’s recovered enough to try and emit some sort of human sound, his eyes trail down the sleeves of his own jumper hanging loosely off of his soulmate and finally reach the *sweater paws* forming there. And, just to top it all off and completely steal all of the oxygen from Clay’s poor lungs, Patches is happily cradled in George’s gentle arms, purring loudly away.

The picture he makes is so soft and domestic that Clay’s heart can’t help but soar and yearn for the future; for the time when they can be together like this in this way, every day and forever.

“Look who I found!”

George announces proudly in a high-pitched, babying voice, making Clay’s cheeks redden even more than they already have as he watches his soulmate nuzzle his face against the fluff of Patches’ fur.

He can’t look away even as he hears a low whisper directed into his ear. He knows exactly who it comes from by the words alone.

“Oh, dude. You’re so fucking smitten.”

Once he processes them, they make him chuckle lightly with the little breath he has left because he certainly can’t disagree.

He truly is, and he doesn’t care. He knows what this is, the sensation unfurling in his chest like a spring rose exposing itself to the gleaming sun, deep and passionate red.

He knows what this is and he’s not afraid.

It’s love.

It's love.

Chapter End Notes

we'll be continuing with clay's pov next chapter! :)

yes, that does mean originally i had more plans for this chapter but then it hit 10k and i had to cut it off somewhere! also, i'm sorry for the little bit of angst but it had to be done... the worst is definitely over now though, so don't worry!

i sincerely wish you all a very merry christmas, ily all so much and i am so grateful for all your continued support!! ♡

galaxy skies

Chapter Summary

Clay takes George on their first date under the stars.

Chapter Notes

helloooo

i swear that i wrote this before we got dnf under the stars on george's among us stream... perhaps i manifested it??

this continues with clay's pov from the last chapter <3

hope you guys enjoy!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Clay's heart feels like it's going to burst out of his chest.

There's butterflies fluttering around his insides, tickling him lightly and causing his heartbeat to only increase rapidly.

He shakes his head at himself, unsure of why his body is intent on heightening his emotions so much that he translates his own nervousness over to George.

Thankfully, however, his soulmate hasn't seemed to have noticed the struggles of Clay's heart quite yet, content on gazing with wide eyes out of the window of Clay's car, where he currently sits in the passenger seat, and pointing out all of the American shops he's always wanted to visit as they drive through the heart of town.

Clay tries, therefore, to conspicuously slip his anxieties about his plan for the rest of their day to the back of his own mind and shield them from George so that he gives nothing too much away, still very much keen on keeping it all a surprise for his soulmate.

They'd spent the morning lazily together, the both of them reluctant to roll out of Clay's bed, but aware they probably should at some point because Clay's family would be arriving home in the early afternoon. Sappnap had had to return to his own house at around eleven pm the night before, leaving Clay and George to stick on a film for about thirty minutes before they'd given up due to the heaviness of their eyelids threatening to pull them into sleep.

Clay thinks that it was exhaustion mostly from his soulmate's side; he knows George has been working himself ragged the past few weeks to succeed well in his Com Sci course, set on making himself and his mum proud, seeing as she had contributed to the price of his tuition this semester. Adoration had flown through his body when his soulmate told him of his motivations, warmed by his care and unwavering humbleness that he always (humbly) denies to the bitter end.

Either way, this morning, he and George had arisen rather late but extremely well-rested and satisfied in the warmth of each other's arms. George was awake first, at least, that's what Clay led him to believe, pretending that he hadn't been so comfortable with his arm slung around his soulmate's waist and his nose pressed against the nape of his neck that he didn't want to move at all.

But it was entirely worth it because Clay 'awoke' to the softness of his soulmate's watchful eyes drinking in his own sleeping form and got to see the bountiful redness that dawned upon George's cheeks and the rush of blood to his heart when his soulmate realised he'd been caught.

Clay doesn't think he'll ever be able to get over it; the image of his soulmate snuggled up in the same bed he's been using for years... alone. In the same bed where he had spent countless nights trying to imagine what his other half would look like, what their name might be, or if he even had one.

George's skin shining gold under the sunlight steaming into his room and spreading lavishly across his sheets had massively sidetracked Clay's goals for the day. Momentarily causing him to lose all thought other than the need to kiss his soulmate senseless, until breath alluded the both of them and their lips stung pleasantly.

He had originally wanted to take George on their first date just after noon; a picnic on the beach under the warmth of shining sun, framed by the line where the blue sky meets the shimmering sea. Now, Clay thinks, they're more on track for a picnic at dusk, but from the dazzling colours cast across the expanse of the sky above them as they drive along, he's starting to like this time of day for their first date even more. It's absolutely stunning; light purples and blues that wash against the sparse clouds like waves.

Clay's about to voice this opinion to George, who's currently humming along to the radio beside him, before he catches himself and bites onto his bottom lip, forgetting for a moment that George doesn't actually know where they're going... *or* what they're doing.

When they had separated in the morning to allow George to take his shower, Clay had taken the opportunity to sneak down to the kitchen and prepare some food for their picnic very quickly, making sure to include all of George's favourites that he had remembered to stock the day before. He's been planning on taking George on an actual *real* date for a while, but had been unsure on the best location until Sappnap had suggested the beach the previous day.

George had given up on trying to squeeze the answer out of Clay, who would normally eventually give in to his soulmate because he can never resist George's pleading puppy-eyes, about halfway into their journey, relenting with a soft huff and a whiny '*Fineeee.*'

Considering everything, his soulmate is currently putting a lot of blind trust into him and the thought makes Clay a bit giddy before he has to shake his head to focus back onto the road. Luckily, they're still stuck at a red light.

His inner struggle to contain his words, however, seems to attract his soulmate's attention, George's head turning to look over at him questioningly and expectantly, halting for a second where he's half-singing to the radio to see if Clay speaks. When he doesn't and just shakes his head, George's light humming picks up again.

Clay smiles at that, because he's enjoying the sweet and slightly off-key sounds more than the actual song; a reminder of his soulmate's presence even when he's focusing on the road ahead.

Still finding themselves stationary a couple of minutes later, Clay heaves out a long sigh and runs

his left hand through his hair, shifting the fluff of his fringe out of face and externalising his frustration. He's tapping along to the rhythm of the song emitted from the radio absentmindedly, ticking off his mental date checklist, when he catches George watching him, rather interested, from the corner of his eye.

"What?"

He half-laughs out, confused and scrunching up his face. George doesn't back down from his questioning gaze, intriguing Clay even more than before, and simply turns his body inwards more to face him as best as he can in the restrictions of his car seat.

After a few seconds, his soulmate's eyes shift again and Clay follows his gaze downwards as his brow furrows cutely. It's with a pang of curiosity that Clay suddenly realises George is looking at his hands, regarding them inquisitively as they flex and adjust their grip onto the steering wheel.

Soon, he feels a brief rush of adrenaline through their bond, like a zap of lightning, from George and he's even more confused than before.

"What is it?"

He tries again, more softly this time but still tinged with light laughter, starting to wonder if he should be becoming concerned. George quickly reassures him that's not the case with a small shake of his head, however, but that still doesn't aid Clay's predicament.

"Hmmm?" George sounds terribly distracted before shaking his head and seemingly coming back to himself, "Oh, nothing..."

George finishes answering frustratingly with a grin before leaning back leisurely in against the leather seat again and bringing up a hand to fiddle carelessly with the collar of his sweater. Clay shifts against his seat and rearranges his grip on the steering wheel, starting to feel partly subconscious because his soulmate is *still* staring where his hands lay, but then he quickly pieces it all together at the same time when he finally manages to place a name to the emotion George had felt briefly earlier.

Attraction.

The light turns green before Clay can process all of this information at once. His body moves on muscle memory and presses down on the gas, moving them forward, so he uses all of his might to divert his attention back to the road whilst a happily smug grin begins to spread involuntarily across his aching cheeks.

When they pull to a halt momentarily, Clay uses the opportunity to sneakily slide his right hand across the console to come to rest on his soulmate's closest thigh, capturing George's attention immediately and causing him to snap his head quickly around to face Clay, as if touched by ice.

The electrification between them is increased tenfold, sparks shooting from where Clay's touch graces his soulmate's bare skin just below where his shorts fall against his legs. Clay can feel the sensation echo in the depths of his heart after it takes a fully fledged tour around his entire body, settling temporarily in his mind as a repetition of terribly unholy thoughts.

Slowly, Clay drags his gaze away from where his fingers lightly skim and up to his soulmate's unmoving and surprised, yet definitely unprotesting face. His smirk pulls at his left cheek as he asks coolly, "You like watching me drive?"

Clay can both see and feel it when George takes a gulp before attempting to splutter his way out of

the question, cheeks scarlet red, before ultimately giving in as Clay hits the accelerator again and draws them closer to where he wants them to be. He doesn't make any attempt to move his leg away from Clay's grasp.

The skies outside are beginning to tint gorgeous hues of lilac that stretch across the abyss of the open air. It's still just about light enough for Clay to see his soulmate's reaction well. George sighs heavily and sheepishly as he gives in once he shoots him a disbelieving raised brow.

"Okay, *fine*. I might think that it's- uh... hot," Clay didn't believe his grin could get any wider or that there was room in his chest for this prideful feeling to expand. George's heart is also racing rather fast as he finishes his words with a roll of his eyes, "*God*, I've definitely been in this car too long, I'm attracted to your freaking ha—the, uh, simplest things. I think I'm going crazy. Literally."

Clay watches his soulmate with a focused gaze. The light ahead is still red, his hand is still splayed across George's thigh and heat is still rapidly rushing between their skin.

"Mmm," He begins in part-agreement; they *have* been in this car far too long. As he ends, he ensures to recapture George's full gaze with low eyes, "I really wanna kiss you right now."

A beautiful and familiar glow erupts throughout his insides and he can feel George's body shift slightly under his static touch before a smaller hand reaches down to clasp onto his own and gently play with his fingers where they remain, a tad cold against his skin. Clay can see his bright smile stretch shyly across his face, even after all this time, and it still always gives him butterflies.

Merely chuckling out a laugh and continuing to regard him with fond eyes, Clay tells him they're nearly there, "About two minutes, probably."

"Good."

George partly whines, making Clay laugh, but he's still unwilling to detangle their fingers on his lap. Clay makes a mental note to keep his hand on his soulmate's warm and blood-rushing skin until it's absolutely vital to use both; right now, they're pretty much on a straight road that leads down to the beach front that Clay had been familiarised with as a kid.

When he can see the golden sands peak over the horizon before them, Clay glances over at George for the few seconds he can spare whilst driving, and he's glad that he does because he can see the sparkling realisation kick itself in.

"The beach?" His soulmate exclaims excitedly with a squeeze of his hand where they're still connected. Clay nods at him, silently massively relieved that George appears to already like the location, even though he always had an inkling that he would.

Once they've parked up, both men eagerly eject themselves from Clay's car and rise slowly, stretching their legs, backs and necks.

Clay breathes in a deep breath of humid air; it's definitely stuffier than the inside of his air-conditioned car and the hot wind rushes wildly against his face, but the view from the promenade, when he ventures slightly forward, knocks the air from his lungs even more.

The ocean is a slowly darkening and sparkling light blue, catching white every now and then under the reflections of the beating sun that's slowly slipping behind the horizon and escaping into the freedom of the night.

With the dawn of twilight, the beach is practically deserted, save from a couple of people Clay can

see jogging along the esplanade and into the far distance. The tide is slowly retreating at this time, washing away to reveal the pearly shells and mussels that it has stolen cunningly from the sea floor; a secret shared and whispered between the sands and the lapping waves.

“Woah.”

George sums up his current emotions perfectly with a single exclamation, bringing himself to stand beside him as he leans forward against the rails separating the walkway and the beach.

When Clay catches the portrait of his soulmate’s side profile, gazing out longingly to the depths of the sea, he never wants to look away again. The sheet of purples covering the sky as dusk settles in lays a picturesque background and George’s grin is *so*, so precious that he wants to capture this image forever and hold it close to his heart; a treasured memory held under lock and key.

There’s this feeling that’s rising and settling like something living in his chest, brimming with words and feelings that Clay desperately wants to spill over to make his soulmate understand just how deeply he-

A new sensation soon settles into his chest, nestling nicely against what’s already snuggled there, pausing Clay’s thoughts and bringing him back down to Earth. *Realisation.*

“Clay..?”

George starts softly, pulling at his soulmate’s sleeve to encourage him to turn to face him instead of the setting sun. He does.

There’s an amazing pinkish tinge creeping onto George’s cheeks as he asks in a small voice, as if he’s possibly unsure, and ducks slightly from his eyes, “Are you taking me on a *date*?”

Clay heart soars with just how giddy his soulmate is feeling, a multitude of emotions whirling around his bursting chest and elevating him up into the now cloudless sky.

Looking down to George and finally slipping his hands around his soulmate’s waist, tugging him closer, Clay answers with the affirmative.

“Do you like it?”

George looks at him like he’s an idiot, which is probably the what the shorter man is also currently thinking.

“Of course I do.”

Smiling into the kiss George stands on his tippy-toes to plant up on his lips, Clay also basks in the warmth surrounding them and their bond, superior in every single way to the stuffy heat of Floridian summer.

He hums happily, gazing down into his soulmate’s glittering brown eyes under the last feeble attempts of light that shine through from the sun, before he adds, “I brought food. I thought we could eat on the beach.”

George agrees eagerly with a nod and a jubilant laugh, seemingly having become rather hungry too. Clay rounds his car to reach the trunk and remove the small hamper and large blanket he had packed previously, trying with all his might not to blush as George gives him another sweet peck on the cheek and calls him cute, taking some things to carry from him in the process.

They settle themselves right in the centre of the beach, atop the sand that's slowly seemingly turning into pools of silver-grey due to the lack of light. They're close enough to the water to be able to hear the gentle backwash of receding waves; a comforting white noise slipping silently into the background of George's partly stifled laughter as Clay struggles to set out the blanket straight on his own, eventually transforming into his soulmate offering him some help (which he shamefully gladly takes.)

Once they've finally settled down and are eagerly tucking into the food Clay has laid out, there's a gentle, unspoken bliss that settles against his heart and he finally feels as if he can relax properly for the first time today. Mind having been plagued with anything and everything that could have gone possibly wrong with his idea for their first date.

George must feel the shift within him too, because when he looks up from his lap, where he was busy peeling himself a tangerine, he meets a contemplating brown gaze.

"Were you really that worried about it?"

There's a lightly-teasing smile gracing his soulmate's face under considerate raised brows as he finishes a bite of his food. Clay could stare at George's soft profile under the setting sun for hours, but answers him honestly all the same, "Yeah,"

Clay shuffles himself against the blanket and doesn't realise until a couple of seconds later that he's shifted himself closer to George. He can feel his own eyes become soft as his soulmate slides his hand across the blanket to cover his by his side.

"I just thought that we should, you know, go on a proper one... and I wanted to take you somewhere nice. Somewhere you'd remember."

Smiling softly at his words, George holds his gaze from under his dark lashes and tells him, "I'd remember anywhere as long as I'm with you."

Clay thanks the gods for the vanishing sun in this moment, and the increasing lack of light that's being cast back onto the beach, because he barely stops himself from choking on a slice of the orange he'd now finally succeeded in peeling before he's blushing a burning red and coughing unfashionably into his hand.

As he regards George's smirking and satisfied smile, he begins to try and laugh out a response defensively but gives up once his protests are drowned out by his soulmate's melodic and triumphant laughs.

His soulmate's burst of positive emotions washing through his veins means that Clay can't stop himself from wheezing and joining in and soon they're a giggling mess until the last slither of light from the sun peeking over the horizon catches Clay's eye and he directs George's attention the same way with a tap of his hand.

The sun pulses a deep crimson into the air that bleeds into the purples splattered across the rapidly darkening sky. Sparkling under the last of the light, the rolling waves rush into their final retreat, shushing the atmosphere that pulls around them.

Clay finds himself speaking lowly and using their intertwined hands to pull George flush against his side so he can essentially whisper to him, as if scared to offset the serenity of the settings surrounding them both.

"It's beautiful."

“It is.”

George agrees with him in a hushed tone, leaning his head to rest against Clay’s shoulder gently and clasping their hands more tightly together. When he feels his soulmate rub his thumb against the back of his hand, however, it sparks remembrance in Clay as he gazes out across the silver-lined sea, basking in the tranquility it brings coupled with his soulmate pressed up in close proximity against his side.

He can practically feel the soul bond shimmering between them, sparkling bright where their legs both touch skin-to-skin. Reluctantly, Clay extracts his right hand from George’s grip, which is hard to do, seeing as the shorter looks up at him with confused and large dark brown eyes.

Clay can only shoot him an apologetic smile as he glances back down to the hold he’s maintained on George’s wrist and continues with his intentional movements; the last breath of light emitted from the sun paints George’s pale skin a glowing lilac under the tilted sky.

Darkness eventually plunges over the sea as the light sinks below the horizon to give way to the ambient moon and stars that are soon to hang in the deep purple skies and shine brightly in the clear night.

But Clay isn’t watching the sunset anymore, eyes fixated on where his own thumb is lightly skimming over the moon-lit skin of George’s palm, shivers pulsing gently down his spine as he hears his soulmate’s breath louden beautifully at the sensation.

He hovers his fingers over the hem of George’s sleeve, reluctant to pull it down his arm slightly and expose the words he had carefully written there earlier in the day to the open air: to the sun, the moon, the stars, when they feel so private and intimate to him.

But, with a resolute sigh he urges his body to respond to his mind’s command for movement all the same, so sick of the words catching in his throat or having to prevent them from slipping out among his wheeze of a laugh.

George remains still, flicking his dimmed gaze between Clay’s movements and his shadowed green eyes patiently, undoubtedly feeling the hesitant conflict reflected in his own heart.

Clay slips the deep blue fabric of George’s sweater sleeve slowly downwards until the skin of his wrist is presented to the night sky, along with the neat and loopy black inked letters he’d printed across his own skin.

I love you

His heart jumps against his ribcage when he feels George’s breath hitch as he stares down to read his wrist and Clay wants to whisper them into the peace of the night over and over and over again.

George slips his head off of his shoulder to meet his eyes and Clay immediately misses the familiar weight, but is captured by the vulnerability lacing his soulmate’s brown gaze.

George’s words are barely a breath as he shifts his wrist against Clay’s, “Do you really mean it?”

He sounds small and so, so hopeful that it could mend any man’s broken heart.

“Of course I do,” Clay tells him, brushing his fingers lightly over the words that currently hold his heart. George’s eyes are deep and soulful, reflecting the purples and blues of the sky above, “I love you, George, *so much*.”

He tries not to let his words choke in his throat, but he's not entirely sure he succeeds. There's so much more he wants to say, to convey to his soulmate just how much and how deeply he feels about him, but words fail him, alluding each and every of his attempts to speak.

Instead, he finds the sincere message stemming from his heart and soul is communicated between his and George's bond; a shimmering lightness that wraps and weaves itself around their hearts and ribs, binding them together. Their hands grip together simultaneously in a hold that Clay never wants to part.

Under the dull illumination of the brightening stars, careful emerald eyes hold pools of brown that swim amethyst as the younger brings his soulmate's left wrist up to his lips and brushes them gently over the three words inked there in a singular, tender kiss.

George is watching him with the softest gaze when Clay reunites their eyes; so soft that it almost feels as if he's falling back against the warmest and fluffiest blankets in the humid air. With this sensation, this *comfort*, buzzing within him, thoughts begin to slip over Clay's mind: lazy mornings shared and wasted away together in bed, annoying and teasing each other relentlessly in the kitchen, cuddling up as close as possible on the couch when half paying attention to the movie blaring aimlessly out of the TV.

Clay has always been in love with his soulmate. He knows this. He's known this for all the years since he learned what they are, what they can *mean* to you. But he could never, in his life, have imagined something like this. His past hopes and expectations pale immensely against what he shares with George. Their *bond*.

"I love the way you make me feel."

He finally manages to scrounge the voice to say, words still delicate as they fall from his bitten lips, not ducking from George's fixed gaze in any way, sincerity bursting from his chest. Clay doesn't have to elaborate because he knows George can feel it by the softening of his kind eyes and the way their hearts finally begin to plunge into calmer seas.

Warmth. Safety. Belonging. Home.

Never before had Clay known that a person could become your favourite place to be; in their arms, by their side, pinned by their body under passionate kisses in the dark, but that's what George is to him. That's what having a *soulmate* means to him.

He's coaxed back from the depths of his mind by the glistening pearls of tears forming in the corners of George's eyes. Clay attempts to quickly extract a free hand to cup his soulmate's soft cheeks and wipe them away but George halts his movements with his own, brushing his fingers against the words on his skin reassuringly.

"Clay," George starts, and *God*, he doesn't think he'll ever be over the way his name slips past his soulmate's lips, whispered so delicately like it's something fragile, something to care for, "I love you too-"

A singular tear frees itself from George's eye and escapes, running wildly away across his star-lit cheek. George still won't let go of his hands so Clay leans forward slightly and kisses it away, making his soulmate huff out a stifled laugh, shifting his head away minutely so he can finish.

"-more than anything. You mean *so* much to me, I- I don't even know what I would've done without you."

It's with this last breathless whisper from his soulmate that Clay finally gives in, lurching forwards to meet George's pink lips in a sweet kiss. He can feel George moving his hands in their intertwined grip and grins ecstatically into his soulmate's mouth when he realises he's still brushing his fingertips against the words penned on his skin. The three words that had just passed both of their lips, broadcasting them into the warm and humid sea air and becoming lost amongst the wash of silver waves.

His heart is thrumming uncontrollably again under the gentle brushes of George's fingers and lips, he can't help it, electrical pulses bolting through their veins and lighting up their bond as bright as the stars that now lie glittering in the dark sky.

Clay's grin is still plastered ridiculously wide across his face when they part, leaving the tiniest of gaps between them, breathing heavily. George's mouth stretches up from a toothy grin into a wider smirk before he speaks, voice louder and fuller than before as he wipes the excess of his tears away.

"Wow. I can't believe you told me you love me on our *first date*," Clay watches his soulmate pull a feigned scandalised face with amused and interested eyes, "Don't you think we're moving too fast?"

A wheeze escapes him before he responds, challenging George's teasing with an arched brow, "You're such an idiot."

It's so fond that even Clay's heart feels like melting; George only tuts and shakes his head before he seems to clasp an idea in his mind, shifting his eyes away from Clay all of a sudden.

"Last one to the water is the idiot." George suddenly challenges loudly and excitedly, and barely audible through his giggled and gleeful laughs. Before Clay knows it, his soulmate is up on his feet and halfway to reaching the water's edge.

"Oh, *come on*-"

He begins protesting, ready to argue that George is clearly cheating until he's racing wildly down the sloped sands that kicks up easily under his bare feet, quickly nearing George through his sheer advantage of height alone and his longer legs.

A grin dominates his face as he hears his soulmate's breathless and chaotic laughter play on the wind. The humid air is cold when it rushes past his limbs as they work probably too hard for a mere playful competition with his soulmate, his engrained competitive nature unrelenting and ever-present in all scenarios.

Seconds later, the back of his soulmate's shirt is just coming within arms reach when George explodes noisily in celebratory glee, turning round just in time at the water's edge to use his hands to stop Clay running completely into him and knocking them both over from the gathered momentum into the hungry, lapping waves.

"*Ha!*" The shorter man exclaims with a striking grin pulling across his cheeks and a raising of his arms triumphantly, "I won,"

George is watching Clay with eager, persisting eyes, tipping up his head slightly to level their gaze. Clay's heart is still rapidly beating from the sudden movement and he's sure George can feel it under his right hand where it's still splayed across his chest from where he had braced himself against Clay's incoming form.

“Who’s the idiot *now*, huh?”

Rolling his eyes as he slides his hands upwards to cup either sides of the base of George’s neck, Clay lets out an affectionate sigh, “Still you for making us have this stupid race.”

George only chuckles back at him, leaning himself slightly against Clay’s hold, which he certainly likes and so brushes his fingers into the tufts of his hair that lay there.

He’s about to say something more when they both jump out of their skin and leap slightly back from each other, suddenly feeling the coolness of a silent wave nip at their ankles as it comes rushing in and soaks both of their feet. (Luckily enough, they’d both abandoned their socks and shoes when they’d settled on the sand).

They glance back to meet each other’s eyes after the initial shock, returning their gazes from their now thoroughly wet feet, and burst into laughter in their surprise and recovery from the initial shock. There’s still water welled around them, the ocean about to heave a huge breath in to suck it back out to sea again, as Clay moves to try and grasp George’s shoulder to steady his soulmate and himself.

The water finally begins to recede, near-transparent under the light of the stars and in the shallows, tugging reluctant pebbles along the sand with it and swooping up spotted seashells. Clay’s reaching out towards George, who’s currently seemingly as transfixed on the pull of the waves as he is, when he hears him utter a sudden gasp and he springs himself towards where Clay stands, splashing water about them rather ungracefully.

“*Woah, woah*,” Clay finds himself exclaiming whilst he tries to quickly assess the situation, feeling both of George’s hands clutch at his side, pulling at the hem of his t-shirt, “What is it?”

Clay feels it as his soulmate’s surprise suddenly subsides and twists into embarrassment as he buries his head into the warmth of his shoulder and answers with a low whine.

“I thought I felt something touch my foot...”

His soulmate’s words make Clay audibly chuckle, no matter how hard he tries, which earns him a well-deserved and amazingly adorable pout from the shorter man. So, he changes his expression and counters him very seriously.

“Well,” He begins in a sarcastic tone; George is already rolling his eyes at him which makes him grin even more, “It must have been something *extremely* ferocious in the three inches of water we’re currently standing in.”

George hits his chest lightly with his hand in reprimand but laughs with him all the same, accompanying Clay’s loud and hearty wheeze.

“I think there’s only one solution to this problem.”

Clay informs him confidently, positioning his body to face George’s head on and settle his hands on his soulmate’s waist. The shorter man cocks his head, intrigued, and sounds disbelieving as he asks, “What would that be then?”

He moves his arms quickly before George has the opportunity to process what’s going on, swooping himself down neatly to secure his grip against the backs of his soulmate’s thighs before he swiftly sweeps him off of his feet with mischievous laughs and pulls George close to his own body as he lifts him upwards, settling him against his chest.

Thankfully, for the sake of their dry clothes, George seems to catch on to Clay's devious plan rather soon and succeeds in locking his ankles around Clay's sturdy waist, giggling noisily in surprise once he overcomes the initial shock and levels his brown eyes with Clay's, wide with exhilaration as he settles into his soulmate's grasp.

"Oh my god- Clay!"

It doesn't take much effort at all for Clay to carry George; his soulmate's build being rather small and slender, especially compared to Clay's stocky and built muscle from his years of playing football. Clay loves this fact, rather openly, he thinks, too, because there's nothing he'd ever be able to hide from George, not that he'd ever want to anyway.

He can feel the rapid beat of his own heart as he stares slightly upwards to George's face, which is now slightly above his own due to their shift of positions, but he can also sense his soulmate's enthrallment, a sizzling burn that collides with the crashing waves in his heart.

George likes the fact that he can very easily lift him up too; the thought makes Clay display a proud and playful full grin before he tells him, "I can protect you like this."

He shifts George's position in his arms and around his waist slightly upwards to emphasise his point, causing his soulmate to scramble to rearrange his legs a little and chuckle with a nervous grin, but he thinks it's totally worth it.

Their faces are pressed close together, George's eyes have been settled and focused on his lips for a while before he finally swoops downwards to engulf Clay's lips again in a kiss, one that's more heated and passionate than the one that they had shared moments before on the beach, but still brimming with the same level of overflowing and almost overwhelming emotion.

The stars in the night sky are reflecting in his soulmate's eyes when they pull reluctantly away, resurfacing for breath. Clay has to pause for a moment because of how entirely beautiful George looks under the slowly emerging light of the pale moon with galaxies in his eyes that encompass the entirety of Clay's universe.

George is moving his head to the side slightly to reconnect their lips when Clay tells him to wait a second with a voice impossibly lower than a whisper. Above him, he sees George lean back slightly to regard him with expectant eyes and bite onto his reddening bottom lip as he waits patiently. Clay flexes his grip on George's thighs, securing him more tightly against his warm body as he speaks with resolution.

"I love you," His intonation is void of breath as the words spill across his now tender lips, but he can't help but punctuate his heartfelt sentiment with a gentle kiss. When he pulls back slowly he holds his soulmate's attentive and soft eyes, "You know, I'm going to have to tell you everyday now."

George's beaming grin and light breathless giggles inform him that he certainly doesn't complain and Clay's heart soars up into the moon-lit and dark purple sky, blinking and shimmering amongst the stars.

Chapter End Notes

happy new year everyone! pretty funny how my upload schedule has me updating on

the turn of the new year hehe, hope you all have a lovely time ♡

my present from me to you for 2021 next chapter is george finally meeting clay's parents! hope y'all are looking forward to it because i know i've teased it too many times ;)

pink tulips

Chapter Summary

George finally meets Clay's parents.

(Featuring Clay and George being all too excited to set their best friends up with each other).

Chapter Notes

hey guys!

i clearly missed writing george's pov because this is a *very* long chapter! i'd recommend you really settle in before reading for that reason :)

enjoy <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The sweltering Floridian sun is hot on the back of George's exposed neck. He curses the unfamiliar weather for the umpteenth time since he's moved here, never quite able to get used to the unrelenting nature of the omnipresent heat and the uncomfortableness it brings.

George is used to dull and heavy-looking British skies, ones that threaten to pour with rain at any second and always seem to tend to, even in the summer. He's used to layering-up hoodies and cranking the dial up on his shitty heater that he keeps in the corner of his uni room for biting and merciless winters.

Florida is still very new to him.

This *situation* is certainly very new to him too, making his way slowly up the grey paved walkway up to the painted door of Clay's house, where not only his soulmate lies this time, but his entire family too.

God.

The thought alone causes minute prickles to trouble the base of his neck, which he physically attempts to evict out of his body with a small shake of his head.

He's so close to the actual moment now that George had almost presumed that he'd have gotten used to and comfortable with the idea of finally meeting Clay's parents, who he's been assured are very excited to meet him. In reality, the opposite seems to have occurred, because George can't even keep track of the pace of his heartbeats anymore, finally giving up and allowing it to race rapidly away against the cage of his chest.

Stepping up onto the raised platform of the porch, George feels a comforting and very familiar wave of reassurance and reflection sweep over him, something his soulmate has been determined

in doing all day whenever George appeared to be spiralling into his own mind. Into thoughts that contain all the stupid and idiotic ‘what if’s that he knows, in the rational parts of his mind, actually won’t come true, yet still manage to vex his brain all the same.

The warm sensation hugs his body tightly and brings a small smile to George’s very concentrated and focused face as he walks forward to become level with the knocker on the door, heaving out a huge breath as he does so, like he’s attempting and failing miserably to somehow invigorate himself.

George can feel Clay’s presence within him through the bond, and the thought that in a just a few seconds his soulmate will be within arm’s reach settles pleasingly into his mind too. He hasn’t physically been beside Clay for a couple of days now, due to his stupid exams and his soulmate’s family commitments and football practices, among other things, so George is very excited for that reason alone.

Perhaps it’s the strange combination of nerves and glee that is currently slightly causing his stomach to churn as he shuffles on his feet against the doormat splayed at the foot of the door. He tucks his bottom lip between his teeth as he lets himself think, eager to calm the stormy waves of his mind before encountering Clay’s family; the people that mean so much to him.

Under the protection of the porch, the sun’s relentless rays can’t quite reach him to attempt to attack and burn his frustratingly pale skin any longer. George picks at the corner of his sweater-sleeve idly as he inhales yet another shaky breath, but it doesn’t do much to fill his lungs.

He’d spent at least a couple of hours last night cycling through his extremely small and restricted array of clothes available to him in a foreign country, with Clay alongside him on FaceTime. Matching shirt after shirt with various pairs of his ‘nicest jeans’, anything smarter not even being an option open to him right now, which had managed to massively stress him out.

Clay had had to remind him several times that he’s literally only coming over to join them for Sunday family dinner, which this week was Shepard’s pie, one of George’s favourites because it reminds him of his mum’s cooking and the comfort of home, and that it’s definitely not a formal affair at all.

“*Georgeeee*,” His soulmate had said to him in an validly exasperated tone as George voiced his stresses to Clay once again that night, glaring at the outfits he’d laid out on his bed as if they’d morph into exactly what he wanted if he did it hard enough.

When he’d turned his head around to glance at the screen of his phone, his heart had managed to slow a little, returning to a much more steady and healthy pace as he roamed his eyes across the visible half of his soulmate’s face, where he was tucked up in bed and listening patiently to his half-coherent rambles.

“Okay, *listen*,” Clay had started again in a half-pleading, half-rationalising tone, probably just wanting to settle down on their sleep-call and fall asleep already, “Wear that really soft grey sweater that you wore the other day when you came over. It’s kind of formal if you pair it with the right trousers... plus, I think it looks really good on you too.”

His soulmate had flashed a brilliant smile after finishing, bringing a bright blush to George’s face before he had inevitably given in, suddenly feeling his creeping tiredness take over the autonomy of his body as well.

In the end, George thinks that he is rather happy with his choice of clothing, or, well, *Clay’s*. He’s got his light grey, cotton (and thankfully very thin) sweater that bunches a little at his arms and

waist but fits all the same, coupled with his aforementioned 'best jeans' (which are really just a dark enough black to look smart) that are cuffed at the ankle just above his favourite pair of white vans.

When leaving his apartment to get the bus into town, George hadn't allowed himself to ponder over it all too much after a preliminary glance in the mirror, fluffing up his hair slightly because Clay's told him that he likes it when it's that way and because George had highly doubted he'd ever leave at all if he'd allowed himself to stare at his reflection for too long.

'It looks so soft when you have it like that', the other man had told him about his hair in the fondest voice the day previous on their call, and had also later printed words of the same meaning across the back of his left hand earlier today. George likes it when Clay runs his fingers through his hair, whether it be at the nape of his neck as they kiss, or the quiff of his fringe splayed across his soulmate's chest in an attempt to coax him lightly from his slumber.

A soft meow draws George from the inward folds of his mind, dragging his gaze at the wood of Clay's door downwards to meet the soulful eyes of a small, tortoise-shell cat. He can't stop his smile as he coos at her gently, leaning down to lightly stroke at her chin and his heart warms when Patches seems to remember him, butting her head enthusiastically into his touch and emitting an array of enthusiastic purrs.

Finally feeling a little calmer, George uses his newfound state to bring his hand up to knock on the door once he's standing again, giggling to himself as Patches weaves in and out between his feet affectionately.

Resolutely, he takes one final deep breath in and subconsciously straightens his posture even though it's never really that bad. After a couple of seconds, he hears faint commotion arise from inside the house, several voices of different intonations carrying through some open window somewhere along the front, probably.

George has to stifle his laugh when he hears Clay's distinctive melodic tone exclaim loudly, "No, no, no, *I'll* get the door." Followed by the protests of an undoubtedly younger female voice that soon relents and fades out of George's ear range as they mutter something about laying the table.

Soon enough, fulfilling his declaration, George can see the towering stance of his soulmate appear at the door through its partially-fogged glass window and his mouth is already stretching into a full-on beam as he unlocks the door with a satisfying 'click' and swings it open.

"Hey."

Clay breathes out softly when it's fully open, revealing to George the pristine and bright white walls of the large hallway once again. Patches hops quickly over the threshold with a grateful 'meow' before disappearing up the stairs with haste.

His soulmate's eyes follow his cat's movements before turning back to face George with shimmering glee, his anticipation also highly identifiable through the underlying hum between their bond as well as the toothy smile stretched across his face.

"Hey."

George finally manages to get himself to say back, absorbing all of his soulmate's handsome features once again in 3D and etching them into his brain. Wearing a fitted black t-shirt that perfectly showcases his slightly toned muscles from years of playing football, George has a hard time keeping his gaze away from his soulmate as Clay pushes the door wider open with one arm

and a nod of his head, inviting him in.

“Are those for me?”

His soulmate asks in an amused tone as he steps through the door, cocking an eyebrow up alongside a questioning green gaze. It takes a few seconds for George to register what Clay means, but then he suddenly feels the weight tucked up into the crook of his arm where he'd been holding his present when knocking on the door and petting Patches.

Taking them into his free hand now, George admires the bouquet of pink tulips that he had intentionally set out to acquire on the way over to Clay's house, also glad that they hadn't seemed to have gotten squashed on the bumpy bus journey either.

His lips stretch into a mirthful grin and a stifled laugh as he answers, “Oh! Yeah, I almost forgot I brought these,”

George brings his gaze back upwards to catch Clay's before he finishes, darting it back down to the bouquet in his hands when he finds it almost too soft for his already dangerously beating heart to handle.

“I bought them for your mum because you said she really likes flowers, and that pink ones were her favourite.”

His gaze is almost at his feet now, watching them shift slightly against the shiny wooden floor, only to have it directed abruptly upwards by the movement of a gentle finger under his chin, tipping it to realign his eyes with his soulmate's, that are a wide and glistening field of green.

Clay's face is partially frozen in an expression of soft surprise above George, curious wonder dancing in his eyes, probably because that was a fact that Clay had told him very long ago, probably in one of their first few conversations and they've had thousands since then, but George had remembered all the same.

George had ensured to file away the little things about Clay's family he'd been told since very early on, eager to gain insight into the people that mean the world to his soulmate and what they're like. He knows Clay's mum takes great pride in her hobby of gardening and in her work too, he knows Clay's dad has a particular interest in photography and a tendency to indulge in DIY projects that never seem to be fully completed, and he knows, certainly, of Drista's dedication to her track career, as well as her shared love with her brother for video games as well.

The list could go on and on with facts George has managed to gather about his soulmate's family over all this time, but he doesn't have any time to think of more of them because his soulmate is looking at him like *that*.

“What?”

George questions, eyes growing wider, beginning to worry that he may have somehow muddled up the facts and got it wrong. His tone is defensive, yet tinged with anxiety. Clay must feel his change in demeanour too, because one of his hands reaches round to gently grab onto his waist reassuringly, eyes near enough disappearing into his large, scrunched-up smile.

“You're so *cute*.”

Voice laced with dripping sweetness like honey, his soulmate's words cause his cheeks to warm and glow, whilst he leans into the grip Clay has on his waist in appreciation.

Before George can even do anything about it, Clay leans downwards to plant a delicate kiss to his smiling lips, shooting bursts of tingling sensations pleasantly up and down both of their spines. He can feel Clay's own unrelenting grin against the skin of his lips and George does his utmost to attempt to stifle his bubble of laughter, very much aware that they're standing in the hallway of his soulmate's house with his family in only the other room, giggling and grinning like idiots to each other.

Consequently, he is also the only one who's apparently willing to pull away from their sweet kiss, Clay protesting lightly in the back of his throat with a small sigh, causing George to fondly shake his head, to which his soulmate lets out an audible laugh.

"Dinner's almost ready," Clay informs him heartily, taking George lightly by the hand and weaving their fingers together, allowing the pace of his heart to slow minutely, "Everyone's through here, I think."

"Okay."

George accepts with a nod, confidence growing slightly when his voice is actually audible and sounds pretty normal, despite all of the nerves jittering around his chest. He offers Clay a pressed smile with his lips, which is probably as good as it's going to get until his worries relent and he's finally able to relax.

His soulmate, thankfully, understands perfectly as always and offers him only a sure nod before leading him down the hall to the entrance of the kitchen. Clay's large fingers rub reassuring and grounding circles into the back of George's hand as they move.

Upon reaching the doorway, George is met with the sight of a dark-blond haired woman, just a tad shorter than himself, sliding her hands out of cooking gloves and placing them on the side after setting what appears to be a large tray of Shepherds's pie to cool on top of the hob.

She's busy closing the oven and turning off all of the dials, so doesn't initially notice them when they enter the room, humming along cheerfully to herself under the beeps of the oven and tucking a loose strand of her hair behind her ear. Clay offers George another tight squeeze of his hand that he immediately sends back along with a deep breath.

The warmth of Clay's family's kitchen is pleasant, unlike the scorching heat of the outside; it's comforting and tinged with a familiar smell that reminds George of home, settling his nerves little by little. His heartbeat soon picks up again, however, when he hears Clay clear his throat to grab his mother's attention.

When she turns around, the first thing George notices is how soft and kind her familiar green eyes are, which somehow relaxes him even more. He watches patiently as he sees them light up in recognition.

"Mum... this is George, my soulmate."

George can barely take the pride he hears and feels carried in Clay's words used to introduce him, the sensation shimmering brilliantly and weaving its way inside his soul, nestled between their bond. He's almost so distracted that he doesn't realise Clay's mum has now made her way over to them, ridding herself of her floral apron in the process, and is now standing before them both with illuminated and excited eyes.

"Hi George!" She greets with racing enthusiasm, lifting George's spirits immediately also in the process, "It's so great to finally meet you. As you know, I'm Clay's mother but you can call me

Sarah if you like.”

Her grin is beaming and pearly white, complimentary to her bright eyes. George takes a second to process everything she’s said before replying.

“It’s nice to meet you too!”

He tells her sincerely, thoroughly glad to have found his voice and a foothold in his ladder of confidence so quickly. George shifts the bunch of tulips he’s still holding in his arms and offers them to Clay’s mum with a tentative smile that soon breaks into a wide grin when he sees her eyes light up even more.

“I brought these for you as a thank you gift, for dinner and having me over.”

Clay’s mum looks instantly elated, glancing over to Clay by his side briefly before her eyes are shifting back onto his, and takes them from him carefully with a gracious nod and a large smile.

“Oh, honey, you didn’t have to!” George bites on the inside of his cheek lightly as he tries to hide the mountainous relief welled inside of him and insists that he wanted to, through a giggled grin, and that it was no trouble at all, “They’re absolutely beautiful, rose-pink... and, oh, tulips as well!”

He doesn’t have to look up at Clay to know that he’s currently being beamed down upon; he can feel it as fluid as water through their bond, resonating within him with the ease of a flowing stream.

“I’m glad you like them,” George says, watching happily and flexing his grip on Clay’s hand as she grabs a vase from the cupboard and fills with water in preparation of settling the flowers in it, “However, I must admit I did have to ask someone to help me pick. Apparently, pink tulips symbolise health, caring-“

“-good wishes and happiness.”

George lets himself grin freely, teeth on show, as Clay’s mother finishes off his words perfectly with a grateful tone and beaming smile as she tucks and arranges the tulips neatly in their placement. He’d been sure she would understand the meaning and is definitely very glad the meaning the florist had given him earlier was apparently correct.

Silently, he makes a small note to leave the florists in town a very nice review, or maybe to leave a very generous tip the next time he visits, because not only had they helped him hit the nail on the head with his gift for Clay’s mum, but also had very patiently helped him tell the difference between each colour flower.

“You two should go through to the dining room,” Clay’s mum soon offers beckoning them whilst carrying the pink-headed vase with her and thanking George once again, “Dinner will be ready in a few minutes.”

As George watches her disappear out of the door, he begins to finally feel the seeping, warmth overflowing across the soul bond, no longer so plagued by nervousness, and spins round to face Clay with a marvellous and eager smile, accompanied by a pleasant aching of his stretched cheeks. His soulmate’s eyes are positively glittering as they study his face.

“Okay?” Clay stills asks carefully, checking even though he would have definitely felt George’s massive rush of relief and comfort flow through him from the bond as he had relaxed into the situation.

“Yeah.”

George breathes out, finally meaning it, as he fiddles with the long sleeves on his sweater, allowing them to fall slightly past his hands, and looks up to give his soulmate a brilliant smile. It's not long before Clay's eyes track down from holding his own brown ones to where his fingers move and brings a slow and steady hand upwards to halt their movements.

"Don't do that."

George's brow furrows instinctively, "What? ...why?"

The breath is trapped in his lungs, waiting, as his soulmate's deep and emerald gaze rises back up to meet his under thick lashes, Clay's tongue also catches momentarily between his teeth as he seems to let himself think, or perhaps *imagine*.

"Because you're really making it really hard for me not to kiss you right now."

A soft light pink is filling his cheeks before he can do anything to stop it, cursing his soulmate for planting thoughts of a similar nature suddenly in his brain.

"Clay..."

He hardly gets to utter out his soulmate's name before Clay's tugging on his hand and smiling in that pleased and triumphant way when he knows he's succeeded in flustering George.

"C'mon," Clay tells him with a playful leer and a tilt of his head, "Let's go and sit down."

Doing the only thing he's currently capable of, George relents with a huffed sigh and a affectionate roll of his eyes at his soulmate's antics. They pass Clay's mum on her way out, who gives George a familial and comforting pat to his shoulder as she passes, and points to the table in the centre of the room, showing him that she's placed the tulips in the centre of the dining table. George's smile broadens and settles comfortably even more.

Upon further inspection of the room, one that was in fact still new to George because the last time he was over, they ate at the kitchen table as it was only him, Clay and Sapnap, George spies a tall, friendly-looking and grey-haired man already seated at the table, flicking through what appears to be some sort of gadget and technology magazine before he registers their presence and chucks it onto the side cabinet behind him as he rises up to meet them.

"You must be George!" He greets happily, his smile and tone surprisingly juvenile and light for a man of his stature.

After confirming his suspicions with a 'Yes' and a nod, George takes the man's offered hand into a firm hand shake, "Clay, here, has told me a lot about you; it's great to finally meet you in person."

The revelation makes George pleasantly giddy as he turns to look up to Clay in time to catch his minuscule flash of a blush and burst into a happy grin.

"You too."

"You can call me Jack, by the way, if you'd like. Being called 'Mister' so-and-so makes me feel old."

George allows himself to chuckle along with Clay's dad's joke and bellowed laughs before Clay butts in in a teasing and incredulous tone, "And you're not already?"

Amused, George watches as Clay's dad merely rolls his eyes at the comment, apparently used to

this level of teasing from his son and reaches to ruffle Clay's hair, which he only manages to do successfully for half a second until his soulmate ducks out of his grasp, protesting in between breathless wheezes.

A wide grin persists on his face as Clay turns away from his dad and practically uses George as a shield in between them as he fixes his hair, running it through with practiced fingers. George can't suppress his laughs as Clay's dad jokingly declares himself the winner of their little dispute, causing his soulmate to stick out his tongue from over his shoulder.

"Are you boys quite done messing around?"

The voice of Clay's mum drags all of their attentions to the open door to the kitchen and the steaming plates she's balancing in her hands. Her tone is stern, but George catches her fondly rolling her eyes like it's something she has to deal with every other night.

"Should I take one of those for you?" He finds himself soon offering once all their laughter finishes subsiding.

"Oh, how terribly kind of you, George," Clay's mum thanks with a grateful smile, positioning herself accordingly so that he could, "Only if you don't mind."

"Of course not, it's no trouble."

Slowly and carefully, the three of them help her to fill the table with the various dishes prepared. George comes to learn that it's not just Shepard's pie, but various other cooked vegetables and the like too, creating a large array for them all to mix and match foods as they wish.

The aroma that fills the dining room is decadently inviting, making George suddenly realise how hungry he is and the fact that he hasn't actually eaten since his lunch at the university's cafeteria much earlier in the day where he had chatted with Karl. At least he's not alone in his sentiments, catching Clay's eyes gleam similarly at the sight of food alongside the ravenous pull at the edge of his stomach.

Setting the last dish onto the table, Clay's mum asks, "Where's that sister of your's, Clay?"

Seating himself down at the table and nodding at George to do the same, pulling out his chair for him, Clay answers as he shrugs, "I don't know, I saw her just before George arrived though."

"Well, I'll have to call up the stairs then--"

"No need," A youthful voice chimes in, its owner soon appearing at the door wearing a yellow (or was it green?) blouse and a high ponytail of her long blonde hair, "I'm already here."

She accentuates her point with a small gesture of her hands, as if to say 'ta-dah!', before walking herself into the room and taking what must be her usual seat across from Clay at the table. Clay's mum is sitting across from George, with his dad to the right of him at the head of the table and with his soulmate directly on his left.

"Do you have to be fashionably late to *everything*?" Clay drawls out with an exasperated but teasing tone and a rather attractive raise of his eyebrows.

"I was tying my hair up, doofus, it was getting in the way," Drista only tuts, taking a sip of her water before speaking again, "Hi George, by the way."

Slightly caught off guard by her abrupt change in tone from snarky to light, George still manages to

greet her with a genuine smile and a slightly nervous chuckle aimed Clay's way.

"Alright, alright," Clay's mum interrupts calmly, trying to gain control of the situation and finishing with a final sigh, "We're all here now, so we can tuck in."

Everybody does so eagerly, the room cast into comfortable silence whilst plates are loaded and passed around for everyone to reach. There's an immensely happy and warm feeling curled up inside of George that he knows is primarily emanating from his soulmate as he watches him glance covertly around the table filled with all the people he loves laughing and talking harmoniously with each other.

The fact that he catches him doing so causes George to smile to himself, basking in the eternity of his soulmate's contentment as he loads up his fork and takes the first bite of Clay's mum's Shepard's pie.

To his delight, the taste is almost as British as he remembers, flavours mixing on his tongue in just the right ratios and causing him to emit a shameless hum of appreciation before he finishes and swallows his mouthful.

"This is absolutely delicious." He finds himself having to comment, gesturing to what's left on his plate with the fork he holds in his hand.

Clay's mum looks delighted with his compliment, as if he were a five-star chef sampling her cooking instead of her son's soulmate, but the reaction is genuine all the same.

"Thank you, George," She takes another bite of the food before continuing, "Clay suggested it because he thought it might remind you of home."

A pleased grin can't help but crawl up onto his face, quirking more at one side than the other, as George turns to face Clay for a second, a couple of mere glances being all that is needed to convey gratitude and affection through a soulmate pair. George's heart even does that stupid skipping a beat thing when Clay's green gaze softens to meet his before he quickly has to whip his head back around to face Clay's parents again.

"It does," He agrees with a nod, bringing another fork load up to his mouth and doing so carefully, dreadfully aware of staining his light-grey sweater, "It's definitely better than the university's food too."

His comment incites laughter from the others and George uses the opportunity to take a long sip of water; apparently nerves are great at parching your throat; a fact he hadn't really realised until now.

"What was it that you're studying at university again?" Clay's dad asks him, pushing his thin-framed glasses further back up his nose.

"Computer Science." George tells him simply, unwilling to get into all of the particularities of his modules and so on because even *he* has a hard time keeping track of it all under the more confusing American terminology used where he studies now.

"Ah," The older, silver-haired man exclaims pleasantly in realisation and recognition, "I suppose you code like our Clay then?"

"Yes. Clay even ends up helping me with my work sometimes," His comment makes Clay's mum chuckle; George grins as he carries on, unashamed to admit such a thing because Clay's intelligence is attractive *as hell*, "The work can sometimes be a little gruelling, but I think I'm

definitely on track to pass all of my classes this semester.”

“That’s really good,”

His soulmate’s dad adds as he chews on his food with a nod, “Any ideas about what you want to do after?”

George feels his body relax into the softness of the fabric backed chair a little more as he begins describing the different routes he’s considered taking before: programme developer, game coding, teaching Computer Science, even, merely glad that all the questions thrown at him so far have been ones that have definitive answers and he can easily find the words for.

He stops himself in the middle of a sentence after a little while, worrying that he’s rambling on a bit, but Clay’s father encourages him to go on, apparently genuinely interested. When he glances over to his soulmate to simply check in with him, Clay just gives him a slight raise of his eyebrows like he knew this would inevitably happen.

“Dad likes his gadgets. He’s an engineer, builds all the parts for computers and stuff like that.”

Is all Clay offers before taking a sip of his drink and maintaining eye-contact with George as he does so, it only breaking when he offers George a wink and the older has to physically turn away to escape the fate of his blushing red cheeks.

Thankfully, Clay’s mum changes the topic by posing a question to George of her own, “So, whereabouts in England are you from? ... If you don’t mind me asking.”

George suddenly hates that his answer is rather boring.

“London. I’ve always lived in the same place really; my university back at home isn’t even that far from where I grew up,” Looking down to load up his fork again, George suddenly realises he’s almost finished his entire plateful, “I guess that’s why I was intrigued to partake in the exchange program with the university here in the first place, even before... uh, everything happened.”

George’s words trail off a bit at the end, feeling bashful for some reason talking about soulmate things in front of Clay’s parents, although they don’t seem to mind at all, chuckling politely as they’re surely aware of their story by now. It boosts his confidence a little, and this is only increased tenfold when he feels Clay’s hand that is not currently occupied with a utensil slide reassuringly onto his thigh and rest there.

“Oh, that’s interesting,” Clay’s mum comments in an inquisitive tone as George takes the opportunity to finish the last of his Shepard’s pie, “You were already planning on coming to Florida before you learned about your soul bond with Clay?”

Feeling the minor protests in Clay to his mother asking such a question welling, George quickly assures him that it’s okay with a calming feeling and breath spared between the two of them through the bond, like a cloudless sky.

“Uh, yeah. It was either Florida or somewhere else in the States. When I found out where Clay lived and remembered I signed up for this program, well, the choice was obvious...”

A sparkling shimmer of what George now knows to call *love* is amplified from Clay into their bond, emanating pleasant shivers to all his extremities and wrapping a summer’s day around the insides of his heart.

His soulmate’s hand on the top of his thigh tightens in what feels like a semi-possessive grip.

When George meets those emerald green eyes, he can barely manage to pick all the emotions laced within them apart.

“Wow,” Clay’s mum soon emits, drawing George’s attention back to his right and catching Clay’s parents shooting what appears to be knowing and familiar glances to each other, “Sounds a lot like fate, I suppose, if you believe in that kind of thing.”

And in a world where soulmate’s exist, many people do. George has never really deeply thought about it either way; hadn’t really questioned it when the opportunity came knocking around for him to fly out for several months with the opportunity to meet Clay... meet his *soulmate*.

Retrospectively, he supposes he could call it fate, a guiding of two souls under the stars. Other answers like human intuition and coincidence slide by his mind, but George soon realises that perhaps they, too, are merely fate by another name, endowed with the same purpose.

He makes sure to glance over to Clay and hold his eyes when he agrees softly, “I suppose it does.”

The rest of dinner continues with comfortable talk of Clay’s parents jobs and funny stories from how they first met, which George finds very entertaining. He makes sure to congratulate Drista on winning a regional title last weekend, which she looks pleasantly surprised that he even knows about, making him feel proud for remembering as he listens to her excitable rambles about how close the laps were between her and her competitors in the beginning, only for her to pull away tremendously towards the end.

Clay’s dad happily announces that there’s ice cream for dessert for those who want it, George finds himself eagerly accepting after having let the rest of his food go down. He’s watching Clay’s mum disappear behind him into the kitchen, after noting which flavour everyone wants, to help when there’s a loud snicker emitted from across the table.

When George twists himself back round in his seat, he finds Drista laughing behind one of her hands brought to cover her mouth (not so covertly). Her cheeks are tinted a happy, warm crimson and her voice catches on wheezes much alike her brother’s as she speaks, answering Clay when he asks her what she finds so funny.

“Oh, you know-“ Drista takes a shaky breath in between her giggles, “Talking about ice cream just reminds me of that one photo of you where-“

“Oh, no, no, no. You are *not* telling that story.”

Clay protests loudly, with what George supposes is meant to be a rather threatening glare shot in his sister’s direction, but Drista doesn’t seem to care at all, only snickering to herself more loudly. George has never felt himself be so intrigued, eager to hear each and every embarrassing story about his soulmate that Clay’s family has to offer when a majority of the time he appears so cool and collected.

“Good thing I’m not telling the story then,” Drista teases in a sarcastic tone and a malignant grin, reaching down to slide what George presumes is her phone out of her pocket, “A picture is worth a thousand words anyway...”

George shuffles in his seat, amused in watching Clay’s eyes open almost comically wide in panic before he makes a feeble attempt in grabbing Drista’s phone from over the table and failing miserably when she pushes her chair back slightly and twists her body away with it in her hands.

Emitting a resounding groan from beside him, his soulmate hangs his head in defeat into the

salvation of his palm, rubbing frustratedly at his eyes. George's partly-stifled giggles seem to draw his notice away, however, and he takes the opportunity to ask, eyes flicking quickly between the two siblings, "Why? What is it?"

Drista's smile leaps onto her face at the opportunity to embarrass her big brother, clearly very glad that George has asked. When he turns to his side again, he meets the mock-betrayed expression of Clay's face with mirthful glee before his soulmate apparently gives up and lets out another groan as he presses his face into his hands.

"It's like the worst photo of me... ever," George's grin widens as Clay's tone turns into that of a woeful whine, "Anyway, I was literally only... what, like six? At the time."

A snort from Drista across the table informs George that she most definitely disagrees, "No way! You were much older than that, *I* was probably about six then. It was when we went camping and you smothered it all over your face--"

"Who's ready for ice cream!" Clay's mum manages to pick the most frustratingly opportune moment to re-enter the room, bowls in hand, exclaiming her words in a sing-songy voice.

Clay apparently decides to use her appearance to his advantage, whining out a protesting, "Mum, *please* tell Drista to stop telling embarrassing stories about me."

However, his complaints seem to have fallen on deaf ears, as Clay's mum's eyebrows raise and her eyes brighten whilst asking, "Oh, is it time for that already? I've got a great one about when you had your photo taken on that alligator at Gatorland and started crying--"

On a alligator...? George isn't given the time he needs to process that one.

"Oh my God," Clay taking one final groan into his hands before resurfacing to shoot a pleading look to George with wide emerald eyes in search of help, "Does dessert have to consist of stupid stories about me?"

"Yes."

Everyone else sitting at the table, including Clay's father, who had just happened to have walked in carrying the rest of the ice-cream, answers the at the exact same time, forming some sort of ominous chorus that has the rest of them falling about into laughter and Clay's cheeks remaining stained red under his palms. (George forms a plan to kiss him there later, to make up for all of his current emotional toil.)

Once they all seem to have regained breath into their lungs, Clay's mother encourages them all to eat up quickly, fussing about the ice-cream melting before they even get round to eating it. George flashes his soulmate a joyful smile as he catches his green eyes once again, and feels immediately how pleased he is that at least George is enjoying himself, which he very much is.

He pauses momentarily when Drista leans forward across the table towards him with a dramatic exaggeration of a whisper tucked behind her hand, away from Clay's direction, "I'll send you the photo later, George, don't worry."

Briefly, he wonders how on Earth she *has* his number in the first place, but George plays along and thanks her through giggled laughs, trying not to choke on his mouthful of ice-cream the best he can. Drista only chuckles when Clay tries to protest again, disregarding him with a roll of her olive-green eyes.

Clay's dad fishes his bowl of ice-cream quickly, settling it back onto the table with a satisfying

‘clink’ against the glass surface and commenting on how full he feels. George is eating his last delicious spoonful when he continues talking, “God, it gets darker earlier and earlier these days.”

“Wow, it’s almost like it’s winter soon.”

Drista comments dryly, which George wishes doesn’t make him laugh, but it does. He tries his best to stifle it behind a cough. Clay’s dad merely rolls his eyes, however, seemingly used to it from his daughter too, thankfully. George is setting his spoon back into his bowl when Clay agrees with his father, glancing over and out of the window behind them that now frames the final flicker of orange light dancing in the sky before it blinks out of existence.

Clay lets out a long sigh, folding his hands behind his head momentarily to stretch his shoulders against the chair. He turns to George as he tells him, “We should really get going soon if we don’t want to be driving in the pitch-black.”

Glancing at the clock positioned behind Clay’s mum on the wall, George is surprised to realise that he’s already been at Clay’s house for a good two and a half hours already. Apparently, it had flown by, which bodes well for telling if George had enjoyed himself or not. It’s also with slight disappointment, then, that he agrees that that’s probably the case.

“I said I’d drop George back at his apartment afterwards.” Clay seems to be explaining further to his mother when George tunes back in to the conversation.

“Oh, surely you can’t drive now,” Clay’s mother comments as she waves one hand vaguely towards the window and the other wraps around the thin stem of her glass, “It’ll be way too dark by the time you’re on your way back.”

George feels his heart plummet all over again at remembering that Clay can’t stay over with him tonight; they’d already had this conversation earlier on in the day via their arms (their preferred means of communication whenever possible).

Clay still has school on Monday, but miraculously, George has no lectures at all tomorrow... perhaps it’s consolation for completing their first round of exams, or perhaps it’s a cruel trick of fate that his free time never seems to align with his soulmate’s as much as he would like. Either way, it sucks massively.

He’s dragged back from his mind by a mild, yet instantaneous, bubbling of molten lava settled in the pit of his stomach. He turns quickly to face Clay, confused, because George certainly wasn’t producing this biting feeling climbing each of his ribs and kicking against his chest like a protest.

Already extending a slightly shaky and worried hand under the table towards his soulmate’s thigh, George has nearly found the voice to ask what’s wrong when Clay beats him to it, aiding him to label the mix of conflicting emotions within him in the process.

“I am *not* making George take the bus on his own this late at night.”

Anger and protectiveness fused up into one confusing whirlpool attempts to swallow the both of them entirely and drag them down into its dangerous depths. George finally lunges his outreached hand to connect with the muscle of Clay’s thigh in a soothing brush and manages to drag them both back to shore.

When his soulmate’s eyes glance firstly down at his touch and then up to meet his deep, brown eyes, the green in them is slightly dazed and dull, like he’s still lying flat on his back, coughing up water in the shallows and trying to regain awareness of his surroundings.

“Oh, Clay, *honey*,” Clay’s mum tells him almost immediately, drawing all eyes back onto herself, “Of course I didn’t mean it like that. I was going to suggest that George just stays the night here.”

As clear as day, George can practically feel the immense and creeping bashful blush of ruby-red that crawls up triumphantly onto his soulmate’s cheeks. His own mouth has somehow worked its way into the beginnings of a curved grin.

“I- um,” Clay coughs lightly into his fisted palm, now very interested in the dish in front of him instead of the four pairs of eyes focused entirely on him, “I suppose that works too, yeah.”

Clay’s mum laughs light-heartedly starting to gather empty bowls in her arms and standing up. George immediately rises from his seat and mirrors her actions, helping to do the same, reminding himself of how he’d help his own mum in the same way back at home; Clay’s mum gives him a large and warming smile of thanks before she speaks.

“Why do you look so surprised?”

She directs her question towards her son before she waltzes out to the kitchen and quickly returns to grab another stack of dishes from where Clay’s dad had now balanced them on the side.

“I don’t know,” Clay admits, trying to regain control over the expression of his face and calm his left over remnants of a blush, “I just- didn’t really think you would... let us.”

“Oh, honey,” His mum exclaims loudly, moving over to where Clay had now also risen out of his chair and is helping return all the placemats alongside Drista and giving him a very motherly pat on the arm, “Don’t worry, we know what it’s like, remember? And we know you and George haven’t been able to see each other for a few days... I know how that feels.”

George’s gaze meets his soulmate’s easily, and although Clay’s eyes seem still a little glassed over, he manages to verbally agree and thank his parents profusely, before turning back to face George with a bright and beaming grin.

Once everyone has helped in contributing to the cleaning up process and night has begun to settle in more permanently, George and his soulmate part ways with Clay’s parents at the foot of the stairs, the older pair telling the two of them to go on up ahead to bed, as they were planning to watch some TV downstairs in the lounge for a little while longer.

George thanks them again for having him over and for such a lovely dinner, whilst Clay hovers behind him, leaning up against the bannister of the stairs and resting his chin against the bleached-white wood.

Admittedly, he’s still surprised when Clay’s mum motions him in for a brief hug, her warm arms meeting him in a tight squeeze. As she pulls slowly back, she speaks to him with sincerity lacing her voice, “It was a pleasure meeting you, George, honey. We probably won’t be here in the morning when you wake up because we both have to head out early for work, but I just wanted to say... I’m so glad that Clay has someone like you to share his life with.”

George lets the kind words resonate over him for a few seconds before he can actually process them, kindling the purest spark of happiness he thinks he’s ever felt. Both of Clay’s parents have also left into the lounge before he has regained the ability to formulate a response, but he could’ve sworn there was the beginnings of emotional tears forming in the corner of her eyes as she spoke.

He did manage to see, however, the broad and reassuring pearly smile of Clay’s dad aimed his way

before they had moved around the corner and into the lounge, his arm tucked neatly around his wife's waist as they go. This brings only further pleasant shivers of approval to burst through his bones and into his heart.

With a relieved sigh of breath that he wasn't even aware that he was holding, George allows himself to think about how this day could not possibly have gone any better.

Frolicking with the positive thoughts swimming pleasantly amongst his mind, George's body freezes for a split second when he feels a large hand slide onto his shoulder from behind, but an unrelenting beaming grin quickly replaces his expression of momentary surprise once he spins himself around to come face to face with his soulmate

"They definitely love you."

Clay tells him softly, reaching forwards to collect both of George's hands in his own and threading their fingers together once again alongside an almost ear-to-ear smile. The warmth settled in both of their hearts is like the ambient glow of a burning fire in winter, so inviting that you almost want to soak up the cushioned comfort it brings for ever more and bury it deep within yourself.

George doesn't give a verbal response to Clay's comment, but his stretched, genuine grin and sparkly feelings tickling the insides of his chest seem to be enough to convey his answer for him. With a light chuckle, Clay leads them up the stairs and steers them towards the door of his room.

Even though he's seen everything in Clay's room before: the half-assed attempts at making his bed in the morning in his rush for starting the day, the surprising number of tattered and well-read books he keeps stuffed onto his one shelf above his desk and the miscellaneous, colourful clutter littered around his PC, George still glances around his soulmate's room with an explorer's wide eyes, enamoured with the fact that there's more and more that he can still learn about his soulmate everyday.

"I love your room."

He comments without thinking too much, simply stating what pops into his mind out loud.

"Mm?" Comes Clay's reply, apparently distracted by something racing around in his own head.

"Your room, it reminds me of you."

Clay watches him with a fond and level gaze, still maintaining the warm hold of their hands even as he reaches behind George to shut the door. Tucked away in his own mind, still taking in his surroundings and their infrequent bursts of colours under the incoming dim streetlights from in-between the shutter blinds on his soulmate's window, it's already too late for George to escape before he begins to realise that Clay's managed to cage him against the door with his large stature and raised-up, strong arm. Not that he would dream of ever doing so, anyway.

Distinctly, he can feel the pulse of Clay's heart thrumming underneath his own chest, as well as his soulmate's due to their close proximity and the heat exuding from the both of them. All air appears to have been sucked out of the room when George goes to breathe, finding sharp intakes of breath the only thing he's currently capable of. Holding his soulmate's dark green and dipped eyes, and refusing to back down, George can feel the fire roar hungrily from within, demanding, not asking, for kindle for its embers, and he's starting to feel like he can't stop himself from jumping in for much longer.

Daring to dart his tongue out quickly to wet his dried, rose-pink lips, George's breath chokes again

in his throat as the hand that Clay doesn't currently have pinned up against the door, bracketing his smaller body easily in, reaches up to lightly hold his chin, grazing his thumb gently across his sharpish jawline.

"*Clay-*" He starts, even though he has no idea how he intends to finish, trailing off when his soulmate's emerald-green gaze glitters above him at his breathless and pleading tone.

Being unable to touch your soulmate's skin for days on end is highly excruciating, especially with the knowledge that they are so close, in reach and your only enemy is time itself and the days that keep managing to slip by. To feel the heat of his soulmate's lips against his own is to touch the edge of heaven, borderline ecstasy.

George doesn't care if he sounds desperate, gasping under the pressure he feels welling in his heart. He lets out a cross between a gasp and a whine as he repeats his attempts to coax his soulmate to lean down and connect his pretty lips with his own, "*Clay. Please, please... I want you to- need you to-*"

His words are brought to a halt by Clay's thumb wandering up from his jaw, where the lower part of his hand still remains, and his soulmate traces the shape of his lips, touch light and nimble, barely-there, shooting instant sensations to the fire pit burning in George's stomach, fuelling the flames that fan all the way upwards until they reach his red-hot beating heart.

George can only watch Clay's darkened eyes as they shift down to watch his thumb move across the plumpness of his lips, pushing down lightly to mould into the soft skin there, bursting it into a spectrum of shades of different pinks.

His breaths are hot as they pass his lips and mingle with the noise of his soulmate's that sound just as weightless and broken. When Clay's gaze finally returns back up to his own blissed, brown eyes, George uses the moment to lean his head slightly forwards to press his lips more firmly against the pad of his soulmate's thumb, in a tender and near-silent kiss.

The air around them is heavy, clouded with intimacy, as Clay looks down at George's action with glazed and affectionate eyes, speaking in the softest whisper as he repeats George's new favourite three words to hear.

"*I love you.*"

There's two biting seconds of stagnation, everything almost moving in slow motion, before Clay's rushing his head downwards to catch George's lips into a bruising kiss, causing him to unwillingly emit the most wonderful light gasp into his soulmate's mouth, only for it to be swallowed hungrily.

George's hands are clutched into the thin fabric of Clay's shirt as the taller pulls them over towards the middle of the room and his bed, and they're settled, still kissing, on top of his sheets before he knows it; drowned in the flurry of movements.

Both of his soulmate's hands are grasped tightly into the back of his hair, pulling George's face as close to his as possible and breathing in his warm and comforting scent. He can't help humming, both helplessly and appreciatively, as Clay's tongue fights its way into his mouth, eagerly tasting and exploring each and every corner.

"*George.*"

His name is breathed by his soulmate as if it's something holy and antediluvian, something fragile to behold. It's desperate and messily murmured against his reddening lips. George uses the

moment of pause in the taller's administrations to allow himself to take control, rolling his poor unsuspecting soulmate off the top of him and landing him onto the sheets to the side before he's swiftly swinging himself upwards to land himself on top of Clay, bracketing his clothed waist with his thighs and panting out a triumphant breath of relief that that actually *worked*.

The younger's green eyes have never been so ablaze, staring up at George like he'd just hung him the moon and the stars with partly open lips, apparently, for once, lost for words.

George is settling himself in his soulmate's lap as he feels Clay return to himself, two strong and large hands weaving their way up the muscle of his thighs until they secure a firm grip on either sides of his waist, locking him firmly in place. George still somehow finds the resolve to display a proud smirk before he's resting his hands, palms flat, against the solid expanse of Clay's chest.

"That was so fucking hot."

His soulmate's words are barely a utterance and more of a growl, engorging the raging fire in his chest once again.

"Yeah?" George finds himself challenging with a tilt of his head and his maintained smirk before he's leaning back down to recapture the pleasurable burn of his soulmate's lips against his own.

"Fuck yeah."

Clay's hands move on his waist, tugging George downwards more quickly to reunite their hot lips in a fiery kiss, tinged by the stained sweetness left behind from their dessert moments before.

Under his splayed hands, George can feel the hammering of his soulmate's heart against his chest, rhythmic and deep, only to nearly miss a pulse altogether as George lets himself move further down Clay's face before eventually connecting his reddened and bitten lips to the protruding line of the dirty-blond's jaw.

Hushed under his deep breaths, Clay emits an almost vulnerable gasp, titling his head for George to access the tanned and sensitive skin there more easily. It's not until George finds himself panting, sweating under his soulmate's wandering hands travel up and down his sides, as well as the material of his jumper, that George brings the resolve to ask in between heavy kisses, "What am I gonna sleep in?"

His words are slurred towards the end where Clay is determined to recapture his mouth and sample him like some sort of foreign delicacy. Hooded eyes glance upwards at him when his soulmate pulls slightly away once again, leaving breaths panting out into the air.

"... my arms?" Clay tries with a wheezy chuckle and a purposefully cheesy tone, leaving George with nothing much to do but roll his eyes as his soulmate chuckles underneath him.

"That was terrible."

George informs him, although the slither of a grin pulling onto his face apparently says otherwise. The other only shrugs his shoulders against the grey and white sheets, leaning himself back against the covers in the process, and returning his hands back down to grip onto the flesh of George's thighs, running his fingers over them so lightly that it sends shivers crawling up the skin of his back.

"I love you." He tells him softly, simply because he can.

Clay's giddy smile is tremendous, because, when is it not? But this one in particular, George

believes, will remain lingering in the brightest corners of his mind for a long while. His soulmate's hair is unfurled against the pillows, dark and shimmering waves of gold under the orange streetlights, crowning him a handsome king, and his eyes still continue to stare up at George with this wondrous amazement that never seems to go away, ever-warming his beating heart.

George watches, mesmerised, as his soulmate's red and slightly swollen lips roll back against his white teeth to stretch his grin impossibly wider before he taps his fingers against the flesh of his skin and he tells him in a hushed voice, "Just grab one of my shirts from my closet, or something. It's super hot tonight."

"Okay." He agrees, finally swinging himself off of his soulmate's warm body to make his way to the wardrobe, planting another kiss to Clay's lips before he goes, earning a satisfied hum from the other.

When they finally settle down for the night, pressed up against each other at every point of contact possible, despite the heat, George's nose is buried in the soft crook of his soulmate's neck, head rising slowly and steadily with every intake of Clay's breath. It's reassuring, as well as calming, coaxing George easily down into a spiral of sleep until he's breathing out evenly and is tipped into a world of overflowing dreams.

~

"Okay, it's your turn next Clay."

George flicks his gaze over to watch as his soulmate closes his eyes and wishes over the two dice he's currently shaking in his hands a little *too* seriously. When he releases them on to the surface of the table, clattering about noisily, his green eyes are immensely focused in.

Peering over the board curiously, George allows himself to emit a loud snicker when he sees what it is.

"Yes! That's a double six!" Sappnap exclaims just as eagerly cheering from beside him, apparently also feeling the need to reposition his seating position on the floor closer to the colourful board situated in the middle of them. He finishes in an immensely happy, sing-songy tone, "That'll be two-thousand in rent, please, *Clay*."

George is still giggling his head off, and even in this state he can predict the words before they fall from Clay's mouth; an extremely frustrated, "Oh, come on now! That's absolutely ridiculous, let me see it."

Monopoly and Clay's unrelenting competitiveness do not mix well together, as one can imagine. That being said, both George and Sappnap find it especially hilarious that he's being made to pay so much now, Clay having spent a majority of the first half of the game bragging about how much money he'd already made off of him and Sappnap landing on his properties and paying rent alone, and becoming even cockier when he'd been the first to build houses.

Without hesitation, Sappnap offers Clay his 'Mayfair' property card with an unchallenged raise of his eyebrows and chuckles sent in George's direction, not helping his own case of bubbling laughter at all.

It's with hushed relent that Clay finally admits his best friend is telling the truth with an unhappy-

sounding, “Alright, fine.” as he hands the card back to Sapnap and begins attempting to mortgage all of his properties in order to stay in the game.

Most people would give up at this point, both hotels having been built on the highly expensive dark blue properties and numerous houses having being dotted on various other properties too.

George had just about barely been getting by, mostly relying on his luck of *not* having landed on any of the higher rent properties for his past few goes and merely collecting his two-hundred from ‘GO’ and saving it for when the inevitable happens; it’s undoubtable that Sapnap will eventually win, already being in control of a majority of the board *as well* as Mayfair and Park Lane.

Clay is fighting a losing battle, and by the scrambling feeling sliding in George’s own stomach, his soulmate knows that too.

“Just admit I’ve won already, dude.”

Sapnap chimes as he shakes his head at Clay’s movements where he’s still hurriedly attempting to sort out his cards and count his remaining funds.

“Yeah, c’mon,” George uses the advantage of physical touch, balancing one of his hands on his soulmate’s knee beside him on the floor where they currently sit cross-legged.

Briefly, it works, because Clay’s attention shifts to his face instead. George gives him a hopeful and tired smile as he suggests, “We’ve been playing for, like, two hours already and Sapnap basically owns half of the board.”

Slowly, George feels the tension of the rubber band pulled back in his stomach ease, Clay sighing loudly alongside it, but listening to his logic of his soulmate all the same.

“Fine,” He agrees resolutely, even though his part-frown shows he’s not entirely happy with the situation, “It’s a stupid game anyway.”

“Weren’t *you* the one that wanted to play it?”

George gleefully teases with a quirked grin, bursting into laughter when Clay finds he can’t exactly disagree and merely scrunches up his face in retaliation.

They’re all helping in packing the game carefully away, Sapnap filling the conversation with relentless brags of his win, unwilling to let Clay live down his defeat for at least the next month, when there’s a loud ‘beep!’ that sounds from the echo of Sapnap’s kitchen.

“Oh, shoot, the pizza rolls!”

The younger suddenly exclaims in the midst of a descriptive recreation of his victory, this time causing Clay to finally let out a beautifully wheezy laugh. As Sapnap runs into the kitchen to save their snacks from possibly burning down the house, George and Clay work in comfortable silence to continue putting the game away, small grins being shared between them both when their fingers accidentally brush past each other and they fall into working with each other in the most coordinated and satisfying way.

Sapnap’s parents are out for the evening, having a fancy dinner somewhere in town, so he’s invited both George and Clay over to spend the time with him. It had turned into more of a board game night when George had spotted the Monopoly box sitting on one of the lower shelves in his friend’s lounge, commenting on how it suddenly reminded him of London, until the next thing they knew, Clay was suggesting they should play and they were two hours deep into their game.

George has gotten much closer to his soulmate's best friend over the past few weeks, staying up late into the night to team on CS:GO, sometimes even when Clay isn't there, George now feeling comfortable enough on his own to carry their chattered conversations and thoroughly enjoy Sapnap's company. So, he was elated to learn that the younger man surely felt the same way about their budding friendship when he'd invited him over along with Clay.

Standing up to stretch out his aching and cramped muscles from sitting on the floor for too long, he then plops himself back onto one of the two couches and lounges back onto it leisurely before emitting a light yawn.

"Long day?" Clay asks with a caring smile as he returns back to George at the couch after depositing the board game back to its gap. The couch dips as his soulmate seats himself close beside him, leaning the side of his face against the back of the sofa to stare openly at George.

"You have no idea."

He manages to half-laugh out before it's swamped again by another half-yawn; his soulmate appears to find the moment cute, because George can feel a light fluffiness expanding in his chest, threatening to tickle the dawning redness on his cheeks like the floating edges of clouds.

Relentlessly, he'd been thrown from lecture to lecture today, before topping it all off with another essay set for next week. His friends at the university had been the only saviour throughout the entire day, of course as well as Clay, who was sending him his support at all times from the heartfelt inscriptions printed on the inside of his arms.

"Tired?" George nods his head solemnly, a soft smile plays on Clay's peach lips before he's opening up his arms and beckoning George forward towards him, "Here."

Eagerly, he shuffles himself towards on the patterned fabric of the couch and wraps his arms under Clay's, bringing his head to his soulmate's invitingly warm chest and pleasant sandalwood scent. George hums in contentment, slightly rejuvenated through the physical touch of his soulmate and his gentle hands gracing the back locks of his hair.

"I swear to God, if I walk back in and you guys are kissing, I *will* leave my own house."

Sapnap's dry and serious tone causes Clay to burst into colourful wheezes before he shouts towards the door of the kitchen for his friend that they aren't (yet) through chuckled breaths. He turns back to face George and asks softly, "I can drop you back soon, if you want?"

George absolutely detests with all of his heart that he has important lectures he has to attend tomorrow, early in the morning. He wishes he doesn't have to go anywhere Clay isn't, but alas, he has an education to fulfil.

His soulmate had picked him up and taken him to Sapnap's, going rather out of his way on his journey back from school; Drishta had apparently got a lift with one of her friends. George shakes his head lightly as he speaks, pulling his head away from his soulmate's chest, finally, and thanking him anyway with an adoring look in his eyes.

"No, it's okay. Karl's in town at the moment so he said he could give me a lift on the way back."

There's a sudden loud clattering that sounds from the direction of the kitchen. Both of their heads snap swiftly in that direction with furrowed brows of concern.

"Everything okay?" George questions quickly, straining his eyes at the doorway through to the kitchen as if he could see what's going on if he squints hard enough.

“Y- Yeah, yeah,” Sapnap’s reply sounds a little shaky at first before it seems to find its footing, the owner of the voice soon appearing at the doorframe too, “I might have lost a couple of pizza rolls to the floor in the commotion, though.”

George laughs freely, licking his lips also at the welcome sight of food, but not without noticing the strange silence of his soulmate beside him; his emotions forming an unreadable swirl, concerning George even more.

Sapnap comes further into the room, placing the plate in his hands on the small coffee table in between them. It’s only because he’s watching his soulmate so closely and knows him so well, that he sees the minuscule movement of communication between the other two men in the room, quickening the pace of George’s curious heart even more.

“What’s wrong?” He tries questioning, only to be left on the outside of their silent exchanges formed of eye flickers and the raising of eyebrows once again. Anxiety starts to well in the pit of his stomach the longer the quiet and unreadable sensation stretches on, “Did I do something?”

He hates how much smaller and vulnerable his voice becomes, but George has no control over it, casting his eyes down to where his fingers are picking at the hem of his hoodie’s sleeve. Very quickly, George can feel something within Clay break, snapping his gaze away from Sapnap’s in return of recapturing his own downcast eyes and his fiddling hands.

“No, no, *baby*,” Clay reassures him softly, caressing the backs of his pale hands with his large tan fingers, “It’s not you, it’s- well, it’s not really my place to say...”

With this, his soulmate’s green eyes flick back over to where Sapnap is still sitting partly frozen in movement on the couch, biting at the bottom of his lip and looking slightly taken-aback. When the youngest meets Clay’s gaze, however, he seems to be jumped back to reality, because a brightness returns to his eyes, dragging him back from whatever far-away land he had just dipped himself into.

“It’s fine,” Sapnap tells him with a soft smile and a air of hesitation before he goes on, “I’ll- I’ll tell George. I trust him.”

George thinks his heart inflates about five sizes larger hearing these words straight out of the mouth of someone his soulmate holds so dear, and someone who he’s very much coming to think as one of his closest friends.

“If you’re sure.”

Clay tells his friend before leaning back against the couch again and bringing one of his arms over the back of George’s shoulders, pulling him closer to his side and causing George to grin warmly, tracing his eyes on Sapnap to let him know that he’s listening.

“Um, okay, right,” The other begins, teeth still worrying the edge of his lips before he shifts and makes himself sit up straighter against the couch, giving George an open and honest gaze, “Well, the thing is... I kind of- uh, might have a crush on Karl.”

The last part of Sapnap’s sentence is massively rushed, as if the words remain in his mouth too long they’ll burn, but George’s lips quiver on the curve of a smile all the same, thinking he at least understood the gist of what he had heard. He asks his friend to repeat the words again, anyway, for confirmation and waits patiently for his reply.

“I think I have-“ Sapnap’s cheeks are crimson red at this point and his eyes shift to the ground

momentarily before returning back up to George's eyes. There's a sigh of breath before he continues, "- a crush... on your friend. On Karl."

He can feel it as his face splits into a beaming smile, "Really?!"

Sapnap confirms with a nod and a slight squint of his eyes as he recovers from his confession, "That's so cool, oh my gosh--"

"Wait..." George adds pensively after a couple moment of consideration, fiddling with the fabric of Clay's jumper as he speaks, "Haven't you only met Karl, like... once?"

His words make Clay release a very loud wheeze from under him, soon descending into fully-blown laughter directed his best friend's way, earning a heated glare from said man in the process.

"Yeah, but I can just- God this is really hard to explain," Sapnap ponders for a moment before finishing, "I can *feel* it. Like, I just... *know*."

George feels his eyes flick quickly over to meet Clay's, feeling the shimmers resonate within the both of their chests; they *know* too. And he can also easily work out what Sapnap's alluding to also, aware of his younger age and a lack of a soulmate so far.

Karl's had no sign of his soulmate since his eighteenth birthday a few years before, much like George. The two of them had shared a quick sentiment in that when they were still becoming closer during his first few days in America. His friend is such a people-loving and kind-hearted person that George wants him to meet his soulmate so, so badly, and he'd only be more delighted if they are, in fact, Sapnap. He can't actually think of a better choice, after briefly comparing the slightly chaotic, yet deeply caring and loyal natures of the two of them.

After a couple seconds of silence, George emits an agreeable hum before asking excitedly with a cunningly planning grin, "So... do you want me to invite him in when he arrives?"

Sapnap's eyes widen massively, leaving both him and his soulmate to smirk knowingly to each other, before he exclaims, "I- um, yes? No? ...I don't know."

George giggles as he speaks, toying with the strings on Clay's hoodie, "Let's just see wait and see what he says. He might be in a hurry to get back home anyway or something,"

He leans his head up to glance into Clay's eyes, shooting him a smile, shared between the both of them and immediately returned with bursting colour.

"Let fate decide."

To fill the remaining hour before George unfortunately has to leave and be whisked away back to his disappointingly Clay-less bed, they settle on playing more board games, mainly because Sapnap claims he wants to upkeep his 'winning streak' (one that George very quickly points out only consists of only *one* win so far, alone).

Trivial pursuit is what they finally settle on playing, after about five minutes of arguing. George even helpfully points out that this particular version includes special questions for kids too, "Just for you, Sapnap!" He tells him with a smirked grin.

"Oh, *ha, ha, ha*. You won't be laughing when I absolutely destroy you at trivia."

Clay emits a chuckled breath as he sets out the board in front of them, returning to all sit on the carpeted floor again, “I don’t think that sounded half as intimidating as you intended it to.”

“Whatever.” Sapnap merely huffs dismissively, causing George to sound a laugh as he settles himself down next to Clay.

When they’re about halfway through the game, but have been playing for what’s coming up to an hour now, George swiftly comes to the decision that they’re all just as apparently bad as each other when it comes to general knowledge.

He’d almost forgotten about Karl’s looming incoming presence until his phone vibrates against his leg and he opens it to a text from said man, that he’s on his way, George having texted him the address earlier in the day.

Looking up from where he’s typing his response, George almost jumps when he finds two keen and focused pairs of eyes watching his movements. Sapnap having paused in asking Clay his question from the card he still holds in his hand.

“Karl’s on his way,” George tells them a little exasperatedly, restraining the incoming roll of his eyes, “I told him he should come in and wait for me, seeing as we’re not finished with our game.”

Which isn’t a lie at all at this rate, all of them still at least two or three correct answers away from winning. Sapnap holds George’s eyes for a brief moment before he gives him a small nod and fiddles with the edges of the game card in his hands.

“And he just... said yes?” Sapnap’s voice is surprisingly small and quiet.

George lets out a light laugh into his answer, “Yeah... Karl’s literally the most easy-going and suggestible person in the world.”

To his left, the younger man lets out a heavy sigh, bouncing his knees up and down slightly where they rest against his feet as he sits cross-legged.

“Dude,” Clay complains after a couple more moments of quietness, allowing Sapnap to recover from this sudden news, but also still incredibly eager to win, “Read my question already.”

“Fineeee.”

When Sapnap finally does and Clay’s incorrect answer ignites yet another heated and loud disagreement, George only finds himself shaking his head fondly.

He doesn’t realise, however, that the argument continues so long that Karl actually manages to arrive before it’s even drawn to a close; the bickering best friends even failing to hear the knock at the front door over their protests about how the answer should be pronounced.

Slipping away easily, George treads his way across the carpeted floor and into the hallway to reach the front door, where another two small knocks sound before he can even reach for the handle.

“Hey!”

Karl’s endlessly optimistic tone carries lightly to George’s ears as soon as he swings the door open, returning his sentiments back with a brightly grinned smile. Karl’s wearing the outfit that George often sees him in the most: his favourite brightly block-coloured hoodie and skinny dark jeans, forming an odd outline against the glowing disappearance of the sun behind the line of houses opposite.

When he sees his friend's eyebrows raise up against his forehead, George immediately figures that Sapnap and Clay's childish arguing can be heard even *outside* of the house, echoing along the walls from the lounge to the open door.

"Ah, so you're still playing, I see."

"Yeah, you could say that." George breathes out in a melodic laugh, ushering Karl inside and shutting the door firmly behind them, trapping out the humid heat of the evening.

"Georgeeee." He shoots Karl an apologetic smile as he hears his name being called whiningly from down the hall.

"Whatttt?"

He asks, reappearing suddenly at the lounge doorway and drawing out his reply in the same way Clay had asked.

"Can you *please* tell Sapnap he's wrong, for the sake of my sanity. I can't even— Oh, hey Karl."

George has to try not to emit a curt laugh as he watches Sapnap's neck snap round to face the door that's behind where he's sitting on the floor. Glancing to his side briefly, George registers Karl's presence next to him in the doorway, offering Clay a friendly wave (since their first meeting, his soulmate has since been a lot warmer towards his friend, thank God.)

"Hey guys, quite the game you've got going on in here," Karl offers happily in his light intonation, his grey eyes taking in his surroundings for a bit before they land on Sapnap leaning up against one of the couches, who has his eyes trained on the newcomer with tenuous thought.

George watches with a warm heart as Karl's face brightens up into a wider smile when the recognition hits him, "Oh, hi! I was starting to think I'd never see you again."

His heart is thudding loudly in his chest for the youngest of his friends as he watches him have to physically bite down on his lip to catch something similar, but with a deeper meaning, fall from his tongue.

George can feel a light tickle, like that of a feather, up against the insides of his chest as Clay watches Sapnap closely, obviously aware of the light pink threatening to tinge his cheeks.

"Hey..." He barely seems to manage with a nod, minuscule smile pulling at his lips, as if he's fighting to keep a larger one at bay. Sapnap's lips twitch, like he'd planned to say more, but he doesn't, so George does it for him.

"You know what? You should join us! Maybe then we'd actually have a chance at finishing the game in the next hour."

In his chest, he feels a wave of appreciation emitted from Clay, who clearly understands the gist of his plan practically immediately.

"We should do teams! That'll definitely make it quicker." Clay chimes in suggestion, shuffling himself over on the floor around the coloured board so that George can slide in next to him and Karl in between Sapnap and George, after he's excitedly agreed.

"Oh, Clay, you can just say you want to team with George already," Karl tuts loudly in good nature, unrelenting in teasing his friend's soulmate about his misplaced jealousy from when they'd first met, "We all know you want him to yourself."

Clay mutters under his breath in mild protest, but doesn't disagree in the slightest, caught out in what was merely half of their true plan but still caught all the same, and causing the other three to laugh.

Seemingly having relaxed a bit more, sitting more comfortably now also, body turned more inwards towards Karl, Sapnap agrees enthusiastically.

"Yeah, it has to be me and Karl versus you two anyway, because you have your weird soulmate brain link... thing, and would probably just share the answers with each other anyway."

George stifles a laugh, feeling and seeing the shocked disbelief that pulls onto his soulmate's face before Clay asks him slowly, "*Please* don't tell me that's actually how you think soulmates work."

Sapnap merely shrugs, but still seems rather alarmingly unashamed in his reasoning. George forgets about his concern, however, when he catches the small glances Karl sneaks over to the younger man as he further explains how he believes soul bonds work, somehow digging himself in a deeper hole in the process, even though there's not really a correct answer anyway.

George has never seen Karl look at anyone else like that before; eyes bright, soft and wide as he pays his full attention to Sapnap running his loud mouth at a million miles an hour, listening to him speak, watching his lips move intently as he rambles on and giggles at his antics in between.

God, George really wishes he was present for their first interaction to see what the hell has both of his friends glancing at each other like this, so... deeply yet tinged with timidity. Like the way he first glanced at Clay.

The thought makes him want to touch his soulmate, so he does, leaning his shoulder up against his own as Sapnap moves to rid one of the now unnecessary counters on the board.

The two they're left with only need two more correct answers to win, so as one can imagine, especially when on Clay's team, the atmosphere is tense and ripe with anticipation.

"Okay," Sapnap announces loudly, shushing all background whispers, "This is a 'Sports and Leisure' question- Oh, come on, this is too easy!"

"*No, no, no, no*," Clay protests loudly to his best friend's claims, pointing with his index finger at the card in his hands with a broad grin, "No changing it!"

"Ugh, *fine*," Sapnap relents, finishing reading the question out in a bored tone like he knows Clay's going to get it right anyway, "How many yards wide is an American football field?"

George laughs happily, clapping his hands together, presuming they'll soon be one step closer to winning, but his face falls when he looks up to meet Clay's facial expression appearing surprisingly stumped.

"You've got to be kidding!" He exclaims at his soulmate as he raises his eyebrows slightly disapprovingly, "You're literally our only hope here. I know nothing about football at all."

Staring up to the ceiling momentarily as his soulmate appears to attempt to mentally calculate it, Clay heaves out a long sigh of defeat, dissatisfaction clawing at his and George's chests, before he answers quizzically, "... twenty-five?"

"WRONG,"

Sapnap exclaims happily immediately after he finishes speaking, Karl joining him in a light patter

of laughs and wheezes when he points out the answer on the card to him, “It’s fifty-three and a third.”

Surely experiencing the accompanying feeling to the frown that burrows onto George’s forehead, Clay turns to his soulmate with an exasperated expression as he claims that the answer is definitely too specific.

Karl laughs out gleefully as he points out, “But you weren’t even anywhere close...”

“... I was *kind of* close.”

His soulmate only contributes in a mildly-petulant murmur before he emits a groan of frustration into the top of George’s hair, causing him to giggle a laugh as he consoles him with a light touch to his hand in forgiveness.

Clay’s determination to win is revamped, however, when Sapnap manages to answer their team’s next question on ‘Geography’ correctly simply because it happens to be about *Greece* of all places, and then George quickly follows up by answering their ‘Science and Nature’ question on the number of bones in the human body correctly, earning him an impressed look and feel of admiration exude from his soulmate in the process.

“Next correct answer wins the game!”

George reminds them all as he picks up the next card to read for Karl and Sapnap, who both appear to be busy hyping each other up across the floor from them, giggling and whispering together; a result of their combined chaotic, and seemingly endless, energy.

“This one’s an ‘Entertainment’ question for you two, then: What was the film ‘The Shining’ famous for pioneering the use of in the film industry?”

Scoffing loudly, Sapnap leans heavily back against the couch behind him, slapping his hands into his knees in defeat, only for George to see him perk up immensely when Karl speaks his answer confidently, “The Steadicam?”

George shares a brief, frustrated look with his soulmate before sighing and admitting that Karl is correct. The two across from them burst into very noisy and cheerful sounds of celebration, somehow coming to stand up and jump around in the process, causing George and Clay to burst out in laughter at their silliness too.

In all the commotion, George can’t tell who flings their arms around the other first, but when he looks up at the two looming men above him again, they’re embraced in a very tight celebratory hug. Clay and George manage to share an exchange of knowing raised eyebrows before they pull back, both of their faces notably more red, although one could always still appoint this to the excitement of winning.

“How did you even know that?!” Sapnap questions with wide eyes of adrenaline and amazement, tracing the lines of Karl’s face with his own dark brown eyes.

“Oh, of course I know it,” Karl laughs out, swaying on his feet but somehow managing to stay in place at the same time, “It’d be pretty shameful if I didn’t, being a film student and all.”

Sapnap’s grin widens tenfold at this revelation of information, “Really? That’s so cool.”

Karl humbly shakes off his complement before he’s delving in deeper, talking more about what he studies whilst Sapnap sits back down on the couch alongside him, listening with intense interest

and a giddily-wide grin.

He's so gone already. George can't help but think, as both he and Clay task themselves with packing the game away (yet again), unwilling to interrupt the other two's flowing conversation, sharing small smirks with each other in the process.

They certainly know what those early conversations are like; the shimmering excitement of finding out anything and everything about the person you like and treasuring all of that information greatly for the rest of time in your mind. Holding it, like something gold and precious, close to your racing heart.

When they finish filing the box back into its place on the shelf at the far end of the lounge, they turn back to find only Sapnap sitting on the couch, twiddling the drawstrings of his hoodie idly, with a stupid grin on his face as he stares up at the slowly beating ceiling fan spinning itself around and around.

"Where'd Karl go?"

George questions, curling up on the couch next to his soulmate when they settle back down and immediately leaning back into the stealthy, large hand that finds its way back into his hair, mussing with it lightly.

"Bathroom," Sapnap answers simply, but not quite meeting both of their eyes as he continues speaking in a lower tone, eyes flicking rapidly around the room, "I- um, invited Karl to come to a party with me... and he agreed."

Clay lights up in happiness for his best friend beside him, "That's great! Who's party?"

The younger's voice is only partially audible as he answers with a gulp, "... mine."

Clouds of confusion swim deep in his soulmate's mind for a couple of seconds, dragging George there with him, before he's asking in a slow tone, "I... didn't know you were having a party?"

There's a loud and singular breathy laugh emitted from Sapnap as he admits in a hushed and partially hissed exclamation, "Neither did *I* until I said it a couple of seconds ago..."

Despite being able to feel how hard Clay tries, his soulmate is unable to keep a large, amused grin from spreading across his cheeks, as he tries to cling onto the sympathy for his friend's current situation.

"Ohhhh... You absolute *idiot*."

Sapnap only responds with a laugh for once, surely admitting to even himself that he can't try and fight his way out of this one. Suddenly, his eyes flash as he grasps onto an idea, bringing his gaze to level with both of theirs for the first time in their conversation.

"You have to help me,"

He pleads woefully with wide eyes and doing a very good impression of what George always tends to do to Clay when things don't go his way. George feels Clay feign indifference on his face, causing Sapnap to continue pushing, whining helplessly, "C'mon, pleaseee?"

George smirks against his soulmate's shoulder, where his head has settled on leaning, knowing that his soulmate definitely would help out his best friend even without all of the pleading, but that Clay is currently enjoying it too much to make Sapnap stop.

He smirks up at him as he adds mocking pleas of his own, “Yeah, c’mon Clay~.”

“Oh no, you too, George.”

Nearly bashing his head on Clay’s chin in the process, George sits up quickly when he’s mentioned, protesting almost too loudly, “What? Why am I involved?”

He is most certainly *not* the biggest fan of parties... and dancing and... mass social interaction. Not at all.

“I literally already told Karl you’d be there.”

This time it’s his soulmate’s turn to laugh lightly at his struggles; at least they’re stuck in this one together, George grumbles in his mind.

“Ugh, fineeee.”

He relents in a still slightly uncooperative tone, yet George’s agreement lights up Sapnap’s face visibly, eyes growing brighter and wider; an almost literal weight lifted off of his shoulders as he takes in a deep breath and thanks them both repeatedly.

A real-life, American house party, George thinks to himself absently in his mind as he takes in a deep and steadying inhale, burying his head back down into the crook of Clay’s shoulder with a lightly burdened sigh, *this should be fun...*

Chapter End Notes

i can now inform you all that this work will be at least three more chapters long (if i don’t end up splitting any of them into parts again) so the end is now in sight! ♥

when i started writing this fic i definitely never envisioned it being so long or for so many people to love it so much, so thank you!!

(also, karlnap!! how are we feeling everyone?:))

ablaze

Chapter Summary

Sapnap hosts a house party and Clay is determined to get George to begin to enjoy it as much as he is.

Karl and Sapnap drift ever-closer together as they deal with their idiot friends.

Chapter Notes

hey everyone!

somehow it feels longer than a week but here we are, i'm glad to see you all again:)

this chapter has a bit of a mix of everything in it in my opinion and certainly will keep you on your toes!

hope you enjoy ♡

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“I still can’t believe you’re throwing an entire party *just* to flirt with Karl.”

Sapnap looks up from where he’s still fiddling with the speaker Clay had just helped him drag from his basement into the living room and gives him a roll of his eyes.

“I didn’t throw a party *just* to flirt with-“ Clay reckons it’s the doubting raise of his own eyebrows that makes Sapnap’s protests switch very quickly into a flat and unimpressed, “Shut up, dude.”

Emitting only a amused laugh at his friend’s burning-red cheeks and ears, Clay finally finishes plugging all of the correct wires into the back of the set of speakers and stands up with an effort-filled sigh. He admires the state of the lounge for a few seconds before he comes to rest a hand on Sapnap’s shoulder in a celebratory way now that they’ve finished their last job on the list.

Setting up for the impromptu party Sapnap had sprung upon them all wasn’t actually all too hard, having hosted events at his house before and his parents not needing too much convincing to leave the house for the night, indulging in a luxurious weekend away.

Walking through the hallway swiftly to enter the kitchen, he does a quick once-over of the white-tiled room too, making inventory of the kitchen island that’s currently covered with the respectable about of booze that they could manage to get their hands on at such short notice. Knowing the way high school parties tend to go, however, Clay is sure that many of their classmates that have been invited will bring their own to add to the collection as well.

The lights across the whole bottom floor of Sapnap’s house are dimmed to a half-glow, casting sharp cutting colours that intercept with the streetlights already streaming in through the windows outside.

When Clay hears Sapnap connect his playlist up to the speakers in the other room, booming it out all too loudly at first, only to quickly turn it down again to an acceptable level, the lights create an almost electric atmosphere against the beating of the low bass that Clay swears he can literally already feel pulsing at the base of his skull.

It's that kind of feeling that one doesn't mind when fused with anticipatory adrenaline, which Clay pleasantly finds already running through his body; probably due to the fact that the last party he'd even shown his face at had been the celebrations from their last big football win a couple of months ago. So, even though this party had arrived under very strange circumstances, he's rather quite excited.

"Do you think it's too loud?"

Sapnap asks, entering the kitchen and swiftly opening up himself a soda to take a refreshing sip with a satisfied and over-dramatised 'ah' to follow.

"Nah, it should be good," Clay tells him, popping open the lid of the can in his hand, "It'll only get turned up when everyone's drunk later anyway."

"True," The other agrees with a huffed laugh, setting himself down at one of the breakfast bar stools across from Clay as he continues, "I still can't believe you managed to get so many people to say 'yes' at such short notice."

"It's my pretty face," He takes the opportunity to tease in a vain tone, cupping his cheeks to pose like he's doing some sort of photo shoot for Vogue, which earns him a sharp jab to his side.

Clay chuckles as he finishes, "Honestly, all I really had to say was that there would be drink and they were all immediately in."

Sapnap sighs a laugh as he replies, "I'm not surprised."

Behind the bleeding of the loud music from one room to the next and the combination of their shared laughter, Clay barely hears the bell of the front door ring but manages all the same, jumping out of his seat enthusiastically to reach it and fling it open, already one hundred percent sure of who it's going to be.

"George!"

He exclaims loudly in greeting, not even taking a glance at his soulmate's slightly taken-aback face before he's throwing his arms around his waist in a tight hug, which is quickly returned amongst a collection of winded giggles from the shorter.

"Clay!"

He soon exclaims jokingly in return, matching Clay's level of excitement in tone, yet certainly not in feeling, having been reluctant to attend such an event in the first place. The contradiction makes Clay chuckle lightly against his shoulder.

"Sapnap!"

Comes the half-teasing, half-mocking voice from behind them, its owner no doubt shaking his head disbelievingly at his two friends' antics. George pulls away at Sapnap's faux-hurt tone at having been left out in their greetings, emitting a chirpy-sounding 'hey' alongside one of his winning and beaming grins directed towards the other man.

It doesn't and hasn't ever worked on the younger, however, and he only jokes sarcastically in response, under his breath, "Glad to know I'm not invisible..." before wandering off back into the kitchen to probably eat more of the snacks that Clay had already told him *several* times to stop eating.

Finally swivelling his head back around from the interior of the house to face his soulmate, Clay meets beautifully crinkled brown eyes and dimpled cheeks. He's so lost for a moment that Clay almost forgets to regard George's outfit for the night altogether; when he sees, he has to detach himself from his soulmate's body to get himself a better look.

Innocent seeming and thin light-grey material hangs itself from his shoulders, swooping delicately at the neck. The hem line follows the trail of his collarbones, leaving them exposed to the kiss of the open air and the wandering eye. The paleness of his skin is near-mesmerising, a close resemblance to that of the moon in the night sky attracting all that gaze upon her.

Just about when Clay thinks he might be a little bit over it and able to form a coherent sentence, his scrutinising green eyes catch the faint remnants of a trail of blue-purple kissed bruises dipping slowly under his shirt from the left side and- *fuck*.

Clay wants to positively devour his soulmate in this moment; to capture his lips against his own and swallow him whole. George's shirt is baggy at his sides before it's tucked-in neatly at the waist into skinny, skinny jeans that Clay immediately believes must be new because he *definitely* would have noticed George wearing them before.

When he eventually manages to shake his head to snap himself out of his stumped haze, Clay soon realises that maybe the couple of pre-drinks he and Sapnap had had whilst setting up had had more of an effect on him than he had previously thought. All flows of consciousness travel like electricity in his brain, bringing a pleasant buzz to the edge of each and every one of his limbs as he carries them, or they carry him.

Even in his lightly drunk state, however, Clay can read the emotions in the pit of his soulmate's stomach. He can feel the shift from reluctance and impatience for the party to be over already before it's even begun, to the flames that are now licking at the insides of his belly.

Clay had checked himself about twenty times in the mirror before taking the short walk between his and his best friend's house earlier in the day, so he can't lie, he *knows* he looks good. He knows it, just as much as he knows that George finds his inherent confidence strikingly attractive.

He'd attempted to tame his unruly hair a little for the party, not using too much product at all, but enough to get it to stick in place against his head. The slight use of water on his hair has made it curl more than usual, swooping and swirling in patterns of gold under the soft, mellow-tone lights from the open door of the house.

The rapid thumps of his heart against the crashing waves in his chest inform him that George *definitely* likes his look. And going by the way his intrigued and wide brown eyes continue to trail down the rest of his body, his outfit too.

Black on black, yet this time Clay had actually ventured outwards from his habitual and favourite black pair of jeans to a pair of multi-pocketed cargo pants that fall rather baggily around his legs like they're supposed to; a product of Drista's influence when she had dragged him shopping one sunny afternoon last summer. For now, Clay makes a mental note to perhaps thank her.

Jewellery and accessories aren't normally his thing, but inspired by the prospect of a party, Clay had dug out a bright silver, although still rather slender and delicate chain necklace with a small

coin pendant attached to the middle. It sits prettily against the dark material stretched across his chest currently, a juxtaposing contrast of the night and the glittering of the stars, catching the lights above.

“You look-...”

George’s words surprise him, just as lost in his soulmate as the other is in him. Clay never lets him finish them, however, merely flashing him a mischievous, knowing grin before he’s inviting him inside.

“C’mon,” His voice is lower than he thought when he speaks. He feels the pleasant shivers it sends down George’s spine, making note of that very interesting piece of information for later, “Party’s gonna start soon.”

It’s with a still partially dazed nod that George willingly follows Clay inside, across the threshold, and into the vicinity of Sapnap’s questionable music taste. When he searches for his soulmate’s emotions once again, he finds pure rush and anticipation replacing the incoming dread he had felt from George before, and that makes him smile to himself, suppressing an ever-so-tempting opportunity to smirk.

Inside, they enter the kitchen to find Sapnap with a mouthful of crisps, looking bored as he leans back against the kitchen counter scrolling on his phone.

“Finally,” His friend drawls out, near inaudibly due to his mouth’s current state occupation, but he freezes rather quickly and comically in his action as he asks, “Karl’s not here yet, right?”

George laughs at him lightly from beside Clay, “Not yet. He’s got a evening lecture, remember? So he said he’ll be coming later.”

Watching Sapnap begin biting his lips and stare down into the red cup he now holds cradled in his hands, Clay hears him attempt to respond flippantly, with an indifferent, “Cool.” Although Clay doesn’t reckon the redness splayed across his best friend’s face is from the dimness of the lights alone.

Clay crosses the white of the kitchen to meet Sapnap where he stands, throwing a friendly arm over his shoulders as he leans against the counter beside him.

Through the fluidity of their bond, George reads the situation and the thoughts flowing through his mind perfectly and excuses himself to the bathroom, leaving the room with a pointed raise of his eyebrows whilst nodding towards Sapnap, who still appears to be finding the bottom of his mixed drink to be very interesting.

Clay dismisses him with a small wave of his hand and a light smile as he tracks his soulmate’s movements on the way out. Shifting his arm where it lies over the broad expanse of his friend’s shoulders, Clay searches his mind for the right words before circling back to simplicity, “What’s wrong?”

His tone is quiet and light, not at all similar to how the two of them usually throw careless, yet harmless, insults back and forth at each other, or tackle each other to the ground playfully during football practice.

These serious moments don’t fall too often on Clay being the one who has to do the pushing, the searching for what’s wrong and what needs being made right, but he’s still well-versed in it. His friend’s vulnerable moments scare him terribly; Sapnap had admitted so to him one night in the

dark at one of their near weekly sleepovers, barely a whisper into the air but a confession all the same.

Clay gives Sapnap's right shoulder a reassuring and grounding squeeze, one that they both know by now signifies that Clay's willing and ready to listen but is happy to wait patiently for him until he's ready. Sapnap is under no obligation to speak, but he does.

"I- I don't know, Clay," He admits, shifting back heavily against the granite-topped counter and the support of Clay's arm, "It's just... what if it's not Karl? After everything, all this--"

Aches emanate from his heart for his best friend as he listens, rubbing his thumb still over the long-sleeved t-shirt he's wearing and feeling it shift under his skin as Sapnap gestures to the kitchen counter set up for the party.

"What if it's for nothing at all and I'm wrong about what I feel?"

Clay contemplates his answer for a couple of seconds and immediately wishes he held all of the answers for his friend; that he could dip his head into the pool of the future and reel off the inevitable truth. But he can't.

"Hey," He starts softly, repeating the word again when Sapnap's gaze finally raises to meet his eyes, "You want my honest answer?"

The younger nods solemnly, bringing some sort of youthful innocence to his appearance.

"I don't think you're wrong."

Clay's seen the two of them together; heard second hand of the mass amounts of texts they've been sharing recently before the party and a couple of late-night calls. Both he and George have seen the way the two of them look at each other, noticing a shimmering reflection of themselves in the pool of fate.

"But what if--"

"Sap, you still have so much *time*,"

Clay stresses this word because he desperately wishes that he had more; thoughts of George eventually leaving Florida having more recently crossed his mind as they cross the halfway line of his soulmate's stay abroad.

"And I know- believe me I know- that it's hard to push thoughts from your mind, but you shouldn't let them ruin what you have now,"

Glancing up at him more square in the face and front on, Clay begins to see the return of the hope and resilience of his best friend through the glimmer of a spark in his eye.

--and what you have right now with Karl is precious, don't you think? Something--"

"Something worth holding on to..."

Sapnap finishes for him quietly, lips barely moving with the words but mouth donning the corners of a small smile even so. Clay tests the waters by tightening his grip on his shoulder and bumping his own against him purposefully, earning him a chuckled laugh and a shake of his friend's head in return.

“Thank you,” Sapnap tells him when his voice has returned back to its more normal levels of volume, “I- I don’t know I’d do without you, dude.”

That makes Clay smile, but admit in return, “Same here.” which has them both grinning stupidly at each other again as they remove themselves from the kitchen counter, finally, and stand back at the island with the drinks (Clay feels like he’s earned a proper one now, his emotional quota for angst filled for the night).

“D’you want another?”

He offers Sapnap as he mixes himself something he’ll probably regret drinking in the morning. The younger declines politely, and is probably about to critique Clay’s taste in alcoholic drinks when George bursts back in through the doorway.

“What is it?” Clay quickly asks, feeling a surging wave of panicked adrenaline hit his veins all of a sudden.

George’s eyes meet his own, widened like he’s just faced the end of the world, as he tells him, “There’s people knocking at the door.”

“That’s what it’s for, *duh*,” Sapnap drawls at him sarcastically after taking a large sip of the drink he still holds and rolling his eyes, “Why didn’t you answer it?”

His soulmate’s eyes form a fixed and exasperated glare on the younger, but Clay’s just glad to see his best friend is already back to his witty self.

“What? No, that’s weird, this is *your* house and *your* party. You go and answer it.”

“Fineeee.” Sapnap whines out, begrudgingly leaving the kitchen and making his way into the hall.

Leaving the two of them alone, George takes the opportunity to ask Clay softly, “Everything alright?”

Clay gratefully takes one of his soulmate’s outstretched and comforting hands, simulating the outreaching and warm feeling in his heart, also, as he tells him sincerely, “Yeah, now it is.”

“Good.”

He’s still left breathless every time George reaches up on his tippy-toes to meet his lips in a kiss. It takes him a moment to finish buffering before he offers George a drink.

“You don’t have to drink if you don’t want to, of course.”

Seemingly contemplating for a few seconds, pensive look on his face and all, George soon comes to a decision, although Clay isn’t sure he’s actually entirely listening because his soulmate’s fingers are fiddling with the belt loops of his trousers, pulling their bodies flush together.

“No, I’ll have some,” George agrees, allowing Clay to turn away out of his grip to face the table and grab him a cup. There’s a few loud and hollered whoops that flood into the house at this point, Sapnap having presumably opened the door finally. Clay can’t help but chuckle lowly to himself as George’s eyes widen at the noise, “God knows I probably need it to get through the night-“

There’s another loud yell of Sapnap’s name before the music flooding through the hall and into the kitchen increases in volume; the bass of the song forming a pulsing heart beat for the house as it awakens with noise. George turns his head back to Clay’s face from the direction of the

commotion with a look of distaste.

“- and all of this... socialising.”

Clay laughs freely into the sip of his drink he’s taking, only to place it back onto the counter in favour of wrapping his large hands on either side of George’s slender waist, which is only accentuated by the tightness of his jeans. He squeezes lightly as he responds in a very poor British accent.

“Don’t worry *your majesty*, I’ll protect you from everyone.”

The words take a moment to register in his soulmate’s mind, but when they do, George eyes snap to become more focused on his.

“This again?” He asks with a disbelieving roll of his eyes, although Clay can feel him teetering on the edge of a blush and a beaming grin, “You drunk already?”

Beginning to feel his heart beat all over his body instead of just within his chest, Clay answers honestly with a cheeky and toothy grin, “Maybe a little bit.”

George laughs up at him, lighting his entire face beautifully despite the lack of illumination in the dim kitchen; it’s one of Clay’s favourite feelings to ever cross his chest, light and airy like the tickle of feathers. His soulmate’s hands meet the middle of Clay’s arms before they skim upwards to eventually land around his neck. Once again, their faces are aligned.

“You’re such an idiot.”

George punctuates his point with a short kiss pressed to Clay’s lips. The taller doesn’t complain.

“An idiot who *loves* you.”

A red flush appears beautifully on his soulmate’s cheeks, making Clay smirk to himself because his goal is always so easily completed, the warmth of summer settling in to his stomach and blooming colourful flowers in the rich soil there.

George quite looks like he’d like the ground to swallow him up. He sounds simultaneously flustered and pained as he requests, “I can’t believe I’m about to say this, but can we *please* join the party.”

Clay laughs as he pulls him back into a kiss.

About an hour or so into the party, Clay realises that there’s definitely more people here than he had invited, but he’s not all that bothered because that’s how high school things usually tend to go; friends bringing friends, who then bring their friends and so on.

He’d spent most of the time acquainting George with his closest friends, most of which were members of his football team and had already seen him once before at the match against their most local opponents and the one that had left him injured for a short while, as well as laughing and drinking with them too.

They’re in Sapnap’s living room, the place where most of the action appears to be, with music blaring from the speakers shoved in opposing corners and a pleasant overlay of careless laughs and calls that can just about be heard over every now and then.

Under the complete disappearance of the sun, the light inside is even dimmer, but Clay can still tell that the room around him is almost as packed as can be; couples kissing in corners and rowdy girls clustered in groups, gossiping to their heart's content.

The party seems to have spilled into all rooms on the bottom floor of Sapnap's house, including the gorgeous green length of the back garden where he can see a few people he does and doesn't know gathering around the beer pong table they'd set up out there earlier.

Clay's attention is drawn back from the outside as the song changes, some dance tune that he's certainly not heard of before but everyone else seems to love, many girls dragging their friends into the centre of the room to dance under the flashing coloured lights Clay guesses someone must have brought with them.

It seems to have reached that perfect time of night at a party where everyone is just about drunk enough to let loose, but not yet drunk enough to feel tired enough to either fall asleep or throw up, and so consequently, before Clay knows it half of the room has swarmed the impromptu dance floor, all jumping up and down wildly and screaming as if they're having the time of their lives.

Feeling the invigorating energy strike deep within his bones, Clay glances over to George beside him, who's standing, slightly leaning up against the wall, and looking just as mesmerised and giddy as Clay as he watches the colourful scene before him.

George is taking the last sip of his current drink as Clay leans down and over to direct his encouragement into his soulmate's ear, afraid it would get lost amongst the rest of the noisy conversations in the room.

"C'mon," He tries to keep his tone low and alluring, "Let's go dance."

The music thumps loudly three times before George provides him with a flat answer of 'no'.

"Why not?"

George gives him a huge raise of his eyebrows and a pulse of refreshingly cold water to their hearts as if it should be obvious.

"*Because*, I don't know anyone here and it's... it's embarrassing."

His soulmate's eyes dip from his own at his last admittance; Clay watches him with curiosity as he counters his point, the hum of the bass flush against his low voice, "Surely that's better, no?"

An eyebrow quirks upwards on George's face as he considers his point, confused. Clay smirks as he watches the lights flicker on and off over his face.

"If you don't know them and they they don't know you, then what does it matter what they think? It'll be like it's just you and me, anyway."

It feels amazing as Clay watches a small grin creep onto George's face, before he's chucking his empty cup into the nearby bin and offering his hand to the taller as if it were a ballroom dance and not a noisy and increasingly sweaty American house party.

"Alright, alright!" George calls over the music, tipping his head back into that carefree laughter that is one of Clay's absolute favourites to hear and feel, oscillating in his chest, "Lead the way, *good Sir*."

Clay takes his hand too gently for the current situation but guides him gracefully to the mass of

dancing teens in the middle of the room, bass still booming and causing the room's four walls to resound with vibrations.

Once immersed in the masses, Clay finds himself holding on tightly to George, not wanting to lose him in the sea of dark and sweaty bodies and pulls him closely flush against his chest.

Listening to the gleeful shouts and cries around him, Clay immerses himself in the adrenaline pumping throughout the room; he lets it zing each of his muscles and jerk him into action, jumping up and down along with the rest of the crowd, gripping tightly onto his soulmate's arms as he does so.

He's laughing out incoherent encouraging words to George as he slowly gets into it too, following his own poorly shown lead. Under the coloured lights, his soulmate is shaded in strokes of green and blue, each curved line of his face caught with masterful precision.

Pink lips stretch into a wide and frivolous grin as Clay feels the reluctance and nerves, that had previously been troubling his heart, crumble away into a canyon river. With the almighty resulting 'splash!', George lets out a carefree shout into the abyss of the noise of music. Anything could have been said and no one would be any the wiser; a perfect place to wield secrets, or a perfect place to let go.

As the songs go by, Clay discovers himself pressed up against his soulmate closer and closer, and with every touch of skin-on-skin, every sultry flick of glittered brown eyes and every lick of dry and parched lips, Clay finds it harder and harder to resist falling into the stereotype of a high school teenager by dragging George off into one of the rooms upstairs to kiss him absolutely senseless.

He's extremely close to doing so, George's now mussed, slightly damp hair and protruding collarbones tempting him all too much, when he feels a buzzing against his leg from his phone. Bursting their blissful bubble, their gazes connect at the exact same time when he flicks up his head, so Clay presumes it's probably Sapnap on their shared group chat.

The reluctance to abandon the static charge that had formed between them is entirely mutual, but with a mere look, Clay and George both make the decision to go and find their friend to see what's up, or at least check what his text says, which is near impossible when pressed up against twenty other bodies constantly moving and dancing vigorously.

When they eventually manage to pull themselves into the hallway again, Clay intakes large, welcome breaths of the mightily fresher air incoming from the open door and the cooling wind. It makes him realise just how thickly the oxygen had laid in the lounge, humidity amplified by the large number of people exerting themselves, setting the room ablaze.

There's also a slight ringing in his ears, the music at an almost bearable level now from behind two walls, but once he's caught his breath, Clay finds himself in fits of laughter that soon translate over to George, the tickles in his chest leaving him giggling too.

Clay takes the opportunity to raise his eyebrows in his soulmate's direction in a sort of non-verbal 'I told you so' as he slicks back the hair that has got loose and escaped, blocking his soulmate partially from his view.

"Okay," George relents, voice a little hoarse and croaking from shouting out wildly and panted between breaths, but giddy and bright all the same, accompanied by a magnificently white, pearly smile, "That was- that was... wow."

When they've finally calmed down, respiration and hearts back to a semi-normal rate (at least under their circumstances), they both decide to split up and do a quick round of the house to see if they can find Sapnap, just because it's quicker and his text didn't really make a lot of sense (Clay even thinks that a part of his message might even have been in Greek).

Clay starts upstairs and works his way down, George saying that he'd check out the garden first. He stops for a little while in Sapnap's room after establishing he's not in there, getting caught up in some of the memories the photos he has on his wall provide: their first day at high school together, impromptu road trips they've taken, messy celebrations of football wins. He grins because remembers it all so vividly.

He's lost in his own mind for a little while, staring into the past, when he feels the sudden, dreadful and chilling sensation creep over him, freezing and slowly and agonisingly cracking each of his bones: paralysing shock.

Immediately, all other thoughts are wiped from his mind apart from *George, George, George, George*.

After nearly colliding with someone at the foot of the stairs as he races down them, taking two or three at a time, Clay doesn't even pause to say 'sorry', uncaring in this moment for anything else.

He pops his head into the kitchen briefly and takes a rapid scan of the room, quickly registering that the only people he walks in on is a group of rowdy boys from his math class refilling their drinks and that George *isn't* there. Focused and mind swirling down, down and down, Clay ignores their well-meant invitations to join them for a drink and storms towards the lounge to continue his search.

The pauses between the palpitations of his heart are unmeasurable, lasting barely a millisecond as it clambers to escape out of his chest and return where it belongs. His mind is worse, imagining the most horrific things and wishing he immediately didn't. The one salvation in his brain is that George doesn't feel physically hurt, only immensely panicked, yet this could still mean a million things.

A hasty scan of the lounge informs him that George isn't there either; the thumping of the speakers mirror the invasive thoughts bombarding his heart and head. A shaky hand rises to run through the strands of hair that irritate him further when they fall across his face, wet and sticky.

The kiss of a cool wind against his cheeks from the windows and doors that someone must have finally flung open allows his mind to slow, just enough so to reach a conclusion in a split second of clarity.

Outside. The garden. George said he would look for Sapnap outside.

He scrambles through the swarm of dark bodies still very much populating the floor, hands working relentlessly to form gaps to slip through and meet the open double glass doors leading out onto the patio.

There's not so many people outside as there is inside the sweltering heat of the house. Clay takes a deep breath of fresh air to refill his lungs, to keep himself going, and glances his widen and attentive eyes around frantically.

The chill is still present in his chest, creeping across the edges of his heart with the threat of frostbite. He squints to the bottom of the garden and can see a cluster of people gathered around in a messy circle, although he's pretty sure he rather *wouldn't* know what they're currently doing

down there.

On the right of the large patio is a set of deck chairs around a table, almost all of them are filled, but none by his soulmate. He trails his gaze to the left, head swivelling quickly because he's beginning to get desperate to escape the dragging abyss of the unknown.

Then finally, and suddenly, he sees him. *George*.

But the sight he sees does nothing at all to quell the merciless racing of his heart, nor the emotional whiplash cast across his entire body. A haze of red pulls across his eyes as they narrow, fixed on the scene before him and topped with a furrowed brow fuelled by ire.

George, his *soulmate*... lovely, kind and beautifully warm-hearted George is pressed with his back against the garden fence, like he'd walked backwards in retreat, only to find himself trapped, ensnared in the pursuer's den. His palms are splayed back against the splinter-littered wood helplessly, with nothing to do, and his eyes are wide open, frozen in the face of danger.

The tall figure slowly and menacingly walks towards George, hands clenched into heavy, lead fists against his sides and shoulders riddled with unrelenting tension. Their frame is well-built and bulky, a silhouetted mountainous range standing between him and his soulmate, yet Clay can't even begin to fathom a guess as to who it is he's about to have a massive problem with; a volcano's roaring in Clay, raring to erupt.

When his feet finally begin to respond to his mind and he's storming across the length of the patio to close the crushing distance between them, fury and confusion still shaking his mind, Clay begins to be able to hear the poisonous and malicious words spat from the imposing figure's mouth.

"Fucking answer me, I saw you dancing with him just now," The man takes another threatening step towards George and causes Clay's heart to fall into the pit of his stomach, tumbling into the black depths, *"Where. Is. He?"*

Time feels like it's moving slow, his limbs feel like they're pulling him through swampy mud. He can't reach George. He can't. And he desperately needs to reach George more quickly than ever.

George is saying something, but it's so small and whispered that he can't hear. Only the near maniacal and cruel laughter of the figure attacks his ears, alerting Clay to the fact that his soulmate had even spoken at all.

Another cutting and snide remark follows and Clay can't focus on the words, only seeing the shaking fear that the noise instils on his soulmate's features. What worries him even more, however, is that he can't even pinpoint George's emotions anymore, like the shorter man has been struck completely numb.

He's finally closer to the threatening character's back and notices the bright red of the hood that's pulled up over his head, so his identity can't be seen, presumably on purpose. There's a crest printed on the back of the hoodie that looks vaguely familiar to Clay, though he can't remember why.

Even in his drunken mind Clay half-manages to scramble to connect the dots as he stares, a weighted and unsettling feeling pooling in his stomach that only expands as he hears the red-hooded man's next words, confirming his dreaded suspicions.

"Your fucking cocky-ass boyfriend got me kicked off the team,"

Clay's skin is suddenly freezing, all hairs standing to attention as he's cast back to the day. To

what he can remember.

The bright flash of floodlights. The wet against his cheek of the grass. The aching pain in chest and in the back of his head.

“Now... you’re gonna tell me, *pretty boy*,” Clay’s close enough now to see the menacing smirk crawling up the man’s face; his teeth glint an ominous shiny white under the outside light, “Or I’m gonna make ya...”

The threat stirs pure adrenaline into them both, mixing acidly with the anger amassing within Clay, welling like the pull-back of the tide in order to give way to a tsunami.

His legs spring the last two steps it takes to throw himself in between the red-hooded figure and his soulmate.

“Get *the fuck* away from him.”

Clay’s there before his body has made the conscious decision to do so, bracketing his arms behind him to encircle George where he’s still pressed up against the fence, protecting and covering him with his larger form. He forces the words out of his mouth disgustedly, his face set into stoicism.

He finally sees the narrowed and black eyes directly as they flick upwards onto his face, locking with his own and widening slightly in recognition before there’s a vengeful split grin spawning on the man’s face.

Clay can see the fire behind those eyes, the unforgiving anger biting at the other’s stomach. A grudge, that he didn’t even know he was on the receiving end of, that apparently needs settling.

“Oh, so *now* you show up?” The man’s eyes remind of a snake’s, narrowed and poised on their prey. Clay doesn’t let his clenched muscles waver at the sight, however unending it may be, “Just when I was about to have some fun too...”

The smirking man nods his head to where Clay knows George is still hiding behind him, rapidly wishing over and over for the beats of his heart to slow with his hands clenched tightly into the back of Clay’s t-shirt.

Teeth are bared as he casts another bellowing laugh into the air to follow, souring Clay’s mind, eating the flesh away there and filling him with fury, fists clenching and curling against his sides, inching to be let loose and fly free.

His last restraint is almost broken before Clay hears the only sound that could probably have pulled him back down to the ground when he’s this far gone in an angered haze and plagued by red.

“Hey *asshole*,”

Swivelling on the spot to check he’s correct, Clay lets out a small puffed breath of relief when he finds out that he is.

Sapnap.

He’s never welcomed the appearance of his best friend more than in this moment. When he looks harder, clouded by the darkness of the sky, Clay can see the outlines of his other football teammates gathered around his best friend, arms crossed, unforgiving and stone-faced.

“You better get out of this house right now, before we make you.”

Clay can feel George's hands clench tighter into the fabric of his shirt and push his forehead against his shoulder-blades as he can finally take a more steady deep breath.

George's gratefulness and relief crashes against his racing heart and wraps its arms around him, clinging near-aggressively as if to not let him go and welcoming him home. He takes the opportunity to glance quickly over his shoulder and into George's deep and still worried dark brown eyes, letting his own green ones to become more solemn.

A growl of discontent is emitted from the bringer of Clay's past injury, realising very quickly that he's surrounded and outnumbered. Now, not only by Clay's football team, but other curious fellow classmates and party-goers too, watching him with fixed eyes as he squares up to their high school's star quarterback.

There's a flurry of movement and shouts of protest as the man quickly makes the smarter decision and makes himself disappear, sprinting quickly to the side gate of Sapnap's house and pushing forcefully through a couple of people to escape out of it.

When the tense atmosphere finally begins to dissipate, Clay feels his clenched muscles eventually begin to relax one by one, as if descending down the rungs of a tall ladder to reach the safe and secure earth below. He spins on his feet to face George, cupping his cheek gently with one hand and intertwining their fingers on the other.

Clay lets his worried green eyes span every square inch of his soulmate's face and body, swearing that if he encounters the slightest mark or cut that hadn't been there before he'd be waging absolute war.

"Are you okay?"

Clay can't suppress the doubtful expression that minimally crosses his face when the shorter tries to tell him he's fine, but George goes further to admit, "*Now* I am. Now you're here."

Leaning back slightly from his hold on his soulmate's cheek, Clay searches his eyes and the chambers of his heart for any hidden feeling, any worry, any fear or any confusion that he'd have to quell or light a fire to battle, but he finds none.

"Come here."

Is all he can mumble under his still shaky breath as the remaining adrenaline continues to pump its way around his body, tingling his limbs and parching his throat.

George listens and brings both of his arms to wrap more firmly around Clay's waist, hugging him and burying his head face-first into the warmth of his chest, sighing as both of their bodies return to where they currently stand on the slightly dewed-over earth.

Clay breathes in the scent of his soulmate's hair, feels the silkiness of his skin under his touch and hears the thrumming of both of their hearts moving in tandem. It's then, and only then, that he feels safe enough to close his eyes tightly and whisper, "I'm here. I've got you- I promise,"

He presses sweet kisses into the line of George's hair and anywhere else he can currently reach, "I'll always be here."

Even though the encounter shakes both them, neither of them allow it to ruin their night and Sapnap's party that had been so mesmerisingly energetic and laughter-filled until a moment ago.

Karl finally arrives about half an hour after all of the commotion has calmed down and both Clay and George are definitely already on their 'one-too-many' drinks for the night for at least the second time.

That's probably why Sapnap and Karl end up having to make a team effort to lug the both of them up the stairs, supportive arms wrapped under each of their respective best friend's shoulders, carrying their dead weight. Miraculously, they somehow manage to make the trip without anyone severely injuring themselves.

When they reach the door of Sapnap's room, Clay's already grinning giddily and thanking his friend profusely with his slightly slurred and drunken words. His and George's shared feelings combine together in his stomach, swirling and making him feel just as dizzy as tingly and light.

Somewhere in a more sober corner of his mind, Clay manages to wonder if the effects of alcohol are felt doubly so because of a soul bond, or if George were drunk and he was not, would he feel the second-hand sensations anyway?

His train of thought is interrupted abruptly by Sapnap titling him over just enough so that he lands clumsily onto his bed, face mashed up against the covers until he finds the strength in his arms to flip himself over and onto his back, grinning toothily up at his best friend who's currently looking down at him with a fond shake of his head.

The bed beside him dips and Clay flinches away for a second before he realises it's Karl lowering George onto the sheets from where he'd been propped up against his side. When he manages to break his gaze away from his soulmate's tremendously red and pink parted lips, Clay turns to find Sapnap and Karl giggling to each other at the foot of the bed, obviously trying to stifle their laughs for their sake, but it only makes his grin widen even more, Karl's short bursts of laughter being highly infectious as they are in a sober state alone.

Clay feels bad, momentarily, that he may have ruined the party with his apparent 'football rival' having shown up and interrupted the atmosphere. That certainly hadn't been the case, however, because everyone had been eager to return back to what can only be described as near-raving when they'd filtered back into the house and under the coloured lights until Sapnap had had to encourage everyone to go home when it hit about two am.

In the back of his mind, also, Clay feels guilty for taking away time that Sapnap could be using to bond more with Karl, but in reality, Clay suddenly realises that maybe him and George edging on the brink of passing out was perhaps a good thing, leading the lovesick duo to have to work very closely together to deal with their drunk, idiot friends.

Clay pretends not to look out of the corner of his eyes as the two seem to deduce that he and George certainly aren't going anywhere soon and so leave to seat themselves on the opposite side of Sapnap's room, where Clay knows his extremely comfy and slightly-tattered couch is situated.

He's still attempting to track the both of them with his eyes when there's a tugging feeling curling at his chest, confusing him. It's a little off-putting, the feelings and intuition he's shared with George for so long now suddenly off-kilter and hard to mark. He gets an urge to reach for George beside him as his soulmate also begins to reposition himself; minds still connected, yet tangled in a muddle.

His hand lands in his dark brown mop of hair, unruly from all the action it had seen tonight. Clay had been aiming to capture the side of his soulmate's face, but he guesses this works too as he smiles to himself along to the trippy tune of his inner thoughts.

George pushes his head further into Clay's strokes of the thin strands and shuffles closer on the bed to his warm body with only an entirely exhausted and tired puff of breath. If there's one thing Clay can definitely pinpoint in their current shared and chaotic clouds of emotion, it's the fact that George is absolutely and entirely ready to pass out. His soulmate is a tired drunk, apparently.

Clay, himself, has always known himself to be a giggly drunk, always being whispered at to shut up when he and his friends used to try stupid things like sneaking onto the school's football field to play when under the influence after a win on one of their biggest games. It turns out that idea doesn't really work when your entire team's hand-eye coordination is at an all time low... (how he even managed to give *himself* a black eye, he still doesn't know).

Resting his rose-tinted cheek onto one of Clay's shoulders, George emits a small, resolute sigh and places a wet and tender kiss to his soulmate's neck, causing Clay to giggle happily once more.

"M'tired..." George starts like he wants to say more, yet trails off. Lightly, Clay runs his fingertips across his soulmate's hand, dancing and skating on the pale skin there.

"Mmm," He agrees noncommittally, his tone lighter than usual, "You can sleep now, baby."

After making a soft noise of approval, George buries his face into Clay's neck and seems ready to settle down. But when something catches his eye on Sapnap's bedside table, Clay just has to grab it to satiate the pull inside of his chest, reasoning that it was valid enough to jostle and disturb George for this cause.

His right hand is luckily the one left free after George's body covers almost half of his own, but his soulmate's eyes flicker open sleepily before he gets to use the pen in his hand.

All he receives is tired eyebrows raised in anticipation against his own skin, which tickles him a little, but Clay simply continues, writing as neatly and as controlled as he can in his current state onto George's forearm that's laid out over his broad chest.

Sweet dreams.

He doesn't stop there, doodling messy hearts around the words and dotting small poorly-drawn smiley faces in between, grinning happily to himself as he does so.

Apparently, George still has a small amount of energy in reserve because he giggles beautifully upwards at him, staring directly into the ocean-green of his eyes as he points out in between yawns, "That'll be on your skin too, you know."

"Good."

Is all Clay says, which has them both laughing again because he clearly had no reasoning behind his act other than pure impulse.

George is leaning over him before he can think, collecting his opposite arm in his smaller hands and finding the dark ink that had penned itself there. He places a light kiss onto them before he's nuzzling the crook of Clay's neck again, leaving the taller man speechless.

"Love you."

George's small and so causally mumbled words bring the strongest warmth to Clay's chest as he watches him settle down into sleep, kissing his temple softly as he whispers the words back to him over and over, tripping up on them a little because of his drunken state but repeating them all the same.

He stops after a few seconds and contemplates sleep for himself. The plush pillows of Sapnap's bed are inviting him to fall into his dreamland, but the stubborn adrenaline coursing through his veins refuses to let him do so.

About to begin silently brainstorming a conclusion to his dilemma, Clay pauses for a second when a snippet of a conversation, other than the one trailing on in his mind with himself, catches his ear, perking up his interest and attention back to the present.

“— you really care for your friends,”

It's the latter end of a conversation, and he can immediately tell that the distinct voice belongs to Karl. If he tilts his head far enough to the right, Clay finds he can just about glimpse the sight of Karl and Sapnap lounging back on the comfort of the sofa together. He listens with lidded eyes as not to disturb; even though it feels somehow wrong for him to listen, Clay soon reasons that he couldn't exactly just walk out and leave the room right now anyway, his soulmate's limbs sprawled over him and with legs like jelly himself.

“Your soulmate is really lucky.”

Oh, how Clay wishes he could see Sapnap's face right now. He does his best to take a quick peek, and his suspicions are only confirmed when his eyeline is met with the crimson cheeks of his best friend, although, he's sure if anyone asked why he'd be blaming it on the effects of the drink or the heat of the Floridian night.

“Oh, uh,” Eyes shut again, Clay can imagine Sapnap bringing one of his awkward arms up to scratch at the back of his head as he's always done when he's nervous, “I don't actually have one — well, I don't *know* who it is... yet.”

A small peek to judge Karl's reaction displays a look of slight confusion but definite intrigue. Clay shuts his eyes tightly again when he sees Sapnap rearrange himself so he can properly face Karl head on before he continues.

“I'm a year younger than Clay... although technically it's only a few months.”

A very much shortened version of Sapnap's moving story to Florida follows; it makes Clay smile when he hears himself be mentioned and a fond recount of the way they had squabbled childishly for days over stupid Minecraft PvP before finally becoming friends.

The story makes Karl laugh lightly as he adds, “If it makes you feel any better- I, uh, don't know if you know- but I'm still waiting to find my soulmate too... it's been quite a while for me.”

Clay's heart aches a little for them both when Karl's words remind him all too much of George's situation before Clay's eighteenth. All the painful waiting, wishing and hoping, helpless in the arms of fate.

The thoughts cause Clay to grip his soulmate more closely against him, making sure George can feel his warmth and presence even as he sleeps. Making sure he knows he never has to be alone again.

“I did know,” Clay hears Sapnap admit in a softer voice, rounded and filled at the edges, “I asked Geo- I mean, George mentioned it... one time...”

God, Clay doesn't even have to open his eyes this time to picture the blush exploding across Sapnap's cheeks right about now, surely a deep and staining red like wine.

There's a couple of moments of silence that follow his admittance; Clay even peeks open an eye to check if they're just whispering or are just watching each other quietly and finds it to be the latter.

From this angle, he can see both of his friends' focused eyes. Sapnap is watching Karl with a very intense gaze, dark eyes flicking over every inch of his face, trying to read signs and find any indications of what he should do.

Karl's eyes are more steady and level, fixed and doe-like as Clay watches them dip down to study Sapnap's lips. Clay holds his breath, afraid to puncture the moment.

The words that fall from Karl's mouth are so soft and intimate that Clay wishes he never heard them at all.

"Would it be okay if I kissed you?"

Karl's large grey eyes are watching Sapnap's reaction carefully, although are still drawn back to his lips almost every second. Under the pressure, Sapnap's tongue darts out to lick at his dried lips as Clay watches him physically struggle to piece together the correct words.

Eventually, his friend seems to give up, because all he can breathe out quickly in staggered breaths is, "Yes. Please. Definitely."

Then Karl's moving his face closer and closer, almost agonisingly slow until their lips rest gently together, keeping them there tentatively until they move and come together again silently in another, testing the uncharted waters gradually more and more.

It's when one of Sapnap's hands weaves its way into the back of Karl's longish and soft brown hair that Clay decides he's definitely seen enough and actually would like to very much fall asleep *now*, please.

Although, even with such thoughts in his mind and desperate attempts to block out the kissing sounds coming from his right, Clay can't help but grin to himself like an idiot for his best friend.

But he is *so* going to tease him about this in the morning.

Chapter End Notes

you may have noticed that i tweaked some of the chapter titles a bit because the way i sorted them into parts bothered me, don't worry tho, nothing has changed within the chapters themselves :)

KARLNAP NEWS: i will be giving these boys their own short fic within this series!!

i thought long and hard about how to best show their story and development, and as this fic is dnf centred and i want to be able to tell the most important parts from sap/karl's povs i thought this would be the best way <3

it will be released sometime after the chapter i'll be posting here next week (for *reasons*), but before the last chapter of this fic, so if you want to be sure to catch it i suggest subscribing to the series !!

ily guys so much, thank you for the crazy support- it rlly motivates me ♡

confetti

Chapter Summary

It's George's birthday and Clay is adamant on spoiling him.

Also, George has some exciting news of his own to share...

Chapter Notes

hey guys!

i'm so excited to share this chapter, it's honestly one of my favourites i think <3 and it's also one of the last!! (more on that in the notes below:)

i hope you enjoy ♡

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Georgeeeee.”

Clay keeps his call a light whisper against his soulmate's ear, testing the waters of his level of consciousness.

The pleasant swirling at the very top of his chest had informed him originally of George's stirring from his slumber, yet, being fully aware of his soulmate's tendency to sleep long and deeply, Clay figured a slow and steady approach to coaxing him to wakefulness would be more appropriate.

“Mmm.”

Is all he receives from the other man. A murmur against the stark white of the pillows so adorable that Clay doesn't even bother to attempt to stifle his smile, well aware of its unstoppable nature by now.

“C'mon, baby,” There's a small flutter against his heart at his use of the pet name that never fails to make his soulmate blush, and Clay watches the stiff movements of his eyelids as they slowly pull open a little, *“I've got everything ready already.”*

George's eyes are almost fully open now, and at finally letting the gold of morning light in, he appears to startle in part surprise as he realises that Clay isn't pressed up against him in bed as he should be.

“Wha-?”

Cutting him off abruptly with a chuckled kiss to his soft lips, Clay positions himself more comfortably on the bed, sitting cross-legged across from George where he's still tucked under the covers, slowly taking a seated position leaning back against the headboard.

“Happy birthday.”

He watches in delight as George finally seems to catch up with the world and, well, the *date*. A large pearly grin is exposed to him when his soulmate is finished quickly confirming Clay’s words by glancing over at one of their phones on the bedside table.

“— *ohhh*.”

Clay laughs, “Yes, ‘*oh*’, you idiot.”

There’s colourful emotions flying like confetti down to his stomach as George morphs his pink lips into a small pout.

“You can’t tease me on my birthday.”

“Oh, yeah?”

He challenges with a cocky grin that pulls upwards into his cheeks.

“You seemed to rather enjoy everything I did to you last night.”

Alongside the splotches of scarlet that soon stretch across George’s cheeks, Clay can practically both feel and see as his soulmate is cast into memories of the night previous: red and swollen lips against tender skin, panted breaths and clothes carelessly thrown into far corners of the room.

The aversion of George’s eyes tell him that he’s won before the teasing has even properly begun. In mercy, Clay changes the subject for him, shifting himself forward on the bed and resting one hand on his soulmate’s thigh when he finds it through the sheets.

“Do you want your presents now or later?”

George’s giggled smile is childlike as he counters, “Is that even a question?”

“Fine, fine.”

Clay sing-songs as he leans over to the side of the bed to scoop the presents he had placed down there just this morning; a product of him having to force himself to remove his body from George’s warm and inviting skin in return for making sure everything is perfect and ready for when his soulmate wakes up.

He can’t stop himself from chuckling again when surprise rises once more like a bursting helium balloon within George’s chest as he places the pile of presents in between them, brown eyes blowing out wide at the same time.

“These are all from you?!”

Placing his hand back on George’s thigh because he could feel that he liked it when it was there, Clay laughs out his reply, “Mostly... a couple are from my family, though.”

His soulmate’s eyes linger on his own for a little while, Clay encourages him to open his presents with a small downwards incline of his head, but still asks a half-chuckled and puzzled, “What?”

George’s hand finds his against the sheets and squeezes onto it with a firm grip, lacing their fingers together.

“Nothing... it’s just, I think this is the best birthday I’ve ever had.”

There's a shimmering plane of warm and calm sea settled around both of their hearts, with a hint of George's birthday excitement bubbling in the shallows of the water. George hums happily when Clay's lips close the short distance between them again.

"It's not even started yet,"

He points out softly, their foreheads remaining pressed together and close for a couple of lingering seconds after they part from the kiss. George is still regarding him affectionately when Clay gestures to the presents again, "Go on, open them."

The light patter of giggles from his soulmate, as he watches him tear at the wrapping paper, orbits Clay's heart, shining bright like the far-off and celestial stars in the sky.

"I'm starting with the smallest." George explains to him happily with a grin, tearing away the last of the paper and pausing to examine the gift when he sees.

"*Oh my-*" Here, his soulmate descends into the most beautiful trail of disbelieving chuckles, "Is this this same one we saw in that shop window together?!"

Clay bites his tongue in between his teeth to try and withhold the large and excited grin that's attempting to fight its way into his face.

"Yeah," He watches George's hands with keen eyes as he fiddles with the small, rose-quartz elephant figurine they had spied together in the back of a thrift shop window in town one weekend, yet, because they were rushed for time as it was already, they never got the opportunity to take a look inside, "I went back and bought it."

His green eyes follow George's movements as he holds it up to the streams of sunlight bursting into the room between the gaps of the blinds; the light pink body glowing a lukewarm white in his soulmate's delicate hold.

"It's pretty," George observes before pulling his hand back out of the light and bringing the elephant to cradle against his chest, "I love it."

Clay watches him with a wide smile as George place the figurine carefully on his beside table to stand next to his lamp and tells him sincerely, "I'm glad." Earning him a sweet grin in return.

When George selects his next present, one that is long and thin and *very* neatly wrapped (his mother's doing), Clay informs him that it's from his parents.

Very contentedly, George rips away at the paper and Clay waits patiently, only leaning forwards to take a curious peek when a spike of perplexed emotions pushes at the back of his neck.

"This is..." George appears as if he can barely process his thoughts right now; Clay can feel them brushing up busily against his own in his head too, "This is a new graphics card..?"

After George holds it up to show him, Clay firms a nod in recognition, remembering his parents asking him if George had wanted or needed something of the sort. Clay had known *exactly* what his soulmate has been desperately needing for his PC.

"Clay..."

Said man stops him with a light hand closing around his wrist holding the gift, attracting George's full attention back onto his face.

“I know what you’re going to say. That it’s ‘too expensive’...” With his soulmate looking like he’s already ready to protest and interject, Clay makes sure to finish quickly, “But my dad got a discount on it because of his work, so you can’t argue.”

With this, George seems to calm a little, physical pressure on their bodies alleviating, and with a bit more convincing from Clay that his parents genuinely don’t mind and had wanted to spend so much on him, his soulmate eventually relents with a happy grin.

“It’s the one you need, right?” Clay asks him still, even though he’s one-hundred percent sure he didn’t forget.

“Yeah.” George admits through a smile, placing the present carefully to the side, as if afraid of breaking it even through the box.

They work their way through the rest of the presents at a steady pace: clothes Clay had picked out and bought for George thinking they would suit his soulmate well, an expensive box of chocolate raisins (*“Because I know you’re like the only person on Earth who actually eats them and you couldn’t find them in the shop the other day.”*).

When George reaches the last of the pile, a medium-sized cuboid box, Clay can feel his heart hammer noisily under his chest as he remembers which gift is left.

“Oh, uh- with this one- you don’t have to try them out if you don’t want to... but I saw them online and thought that you might like to...”

He watches George’s head tilt interestedly, like an inquisitive animal, as he watches him trip over his words and surely feels the increased pace of his stupid heart as his soulmate begins to remove the wrapping paper.

Clay’s convinced his heart almost stops beating altogether as he watches George’s hands slow in their movements once the top of the box is revealed, and then they reach to caress the present’s edges gently, as if it’s something precious.

“... You bought me EnChroma glasses?”

George’s bubbling and rushing excitement brushing upwards and past both of their hearts, soon filling their upper chests tells Clay that his soulmate definitely already knows what they are, and he’s massively relieved because of this, sure he would have stumbled over his words if he had had to supply an explanation whilst wallowing in his nerves.

Colourblind glasses.

“As I said,” Clay can’t halt himself from adding hurriedly, “If you don’t want to try them out or anything that’s completely fine. I’ve got the receipt and stuff so-“

He’s cut off by a crushing kiss delivered to his lips, a warm and bursting blood-rush. One of George’s hands finds Clay’s jaw and cradles it lightly, pulling him in closer and saying *thank you, thank you, thank you* a million times over in a million different ways with his tongue, sweet lips and the rising, tingling sensation engulfing their insides.

And Clay feels his own crashing waves of relief soon drop into the mix too, panting heavily when George leans away finally. The last thing he had wanted to do was make it seem as if he thought George needed fixing or changing in any way, so he’s glad his soulmate can read between the lines to find his true intentions.

“Have you ever tried them before?”

He asks lowly into the space in between the two of them, speaking quietly as if a raised tone will shatter George’s deep gaze of amazement and anticipation down at the box in his hands.

“No.” George admits breathlessly, darting his bright, brown eyes up to Clay’s before they’re back and focused on the gift.

“Do you want to try them now?”

Clay’s suggestion is light; he had made time in their day for this if George wanted it to happen, but he completely understands if he doesn’t. However, George nods quietly, still staring down at his hands as he unboxes the glasses with care.

“They look cooler than I thought they would.”

Clay finds himself joking to shift some of the stable silence that had fallen around the two of them as George disregards the box to the side and pinches the frames between his two fingers to avoid smudging the lenses.

Poking him in the side in reprimand with his free hand, his soulmate laughs heartily before his large brown eyes are roaming over the contents of his hand again, roseate lips trapped under the bite of his teeth.

He must feel Clay’s questioning gaze from the tug at their chests because George admits, with a slight flicker upwards of his eyes, “I’m kind of scared.”

The fear of the unknown. So that’s what Clay can feel cascading down his torso and settling uncomfortably in the pit of his stomach. Stuck for options on how to drag George out of it, he settles for a soft voice and a grab of his soulmate’s free hand as he offers, “You can see me through them first?”

George’s head raises to beam a smile, somehow completed through his still-bitten lip, and leads Clay to shoot one back in return as he realises, “I’ll be the first thing you see through the colourblind glasses!”

His words entice an adorable giggle out of George, “*Oh my god.*”

It’s with a deep breath that his soulmate finally puts the red-tinted glasses on, landing them fittingly against his ears and under his dark-brown curls. Clay is sure their soul bond doesn’t even do it justice when he sees amazement and mesmerisation dawn on George’s face as he glances around the room.

The sensations in his chest pop like little tiny fireworks of excitement and wonder and a thousand other feelings all at once. Clay almost feels like he’s seeing some of the colours of the world for the first time too, with the way that George is tightly holding onto his one hand and his heart is trying to escape from his chest.

Clay’s eyes are bright and mightily fond when George finally turns back to face him with the largest grin on his face, splitting his cheeks and exposing his canyon-like dimples. He’s about to ask his soulmate how he’s doing when George beats him to it by commenting quizzically, “*Wait, your hoodie is... darker...*”

He lets himself chuckle a little at George’s juvenile wonder, “Well, green is darker than yellow... and you usually see yellow.”

George's wide, brown eyes are focused and fixated on the fabric of his jumper, roaming over it as if etching the newfound colour into his brain. To make everything easier, Clay rises from the bed quickly to finally pull open the blinds of George's room and expose the bedsheets to the morning sun.

Plumes of light fall in through the window, dipping the entire room in gold and causing both of them to squint at the exposure to sudden light. George's eyes shine bright and eager in the sun as he exclaims, "*Wait*, you're actually wearing green."

Clay laughs as he finishes tucking the pull-string of the blind away back behind the curtain to the side, "I am! I am."

He's trying to make his way back to the bed to sit down again when, instead, George swiftly leaps forwards and meets him just in front of the window, fingers catching the bottom of Clay's chartreuse-green hoodie and fiddling with the soft material as his brow furrows tightly in concentration. Clay doesn't think he's ever found his soulmate more adorable than in this moment.

Attempting to move them both back towards the invitingly comfortable bed once again, Clay finds himself stopped by a small hand pressed against his chest, "No, no, wait. Stay there."

George then proceeds to continue to study the colour of his hoodie with one hand, and draw the material of the curtain beside him to align with it in the other, covered in patterns of yellow flowers, mouth falling slightly open as he begins to register the difference Clay feels him see.

"You're so cute."

Clay can't stop himself from chuckling out lightly, bringing his own previously idle hands to rest at George's elbows as he flicks his eyes between the two materials almost hungrily.

Mind wandering off to other places he definitely needs to bring George so that he can experience them all over again in a new light, Clay is nearly thrown off-balance when his lips are soon engulfed in another kiss.

Despite the frames of the glasses pressing into the flesh of his cheeks rather uncomfortably, Clay couldn't be happier in this moment seeing his soulmate so excited about all of his birthday presents, humming and grinning gleefully into their kiss.

Excitement and anticipation thrum through their bond magnetically, even as they part for breath, drawing and attracting them back together instantly. Heart hammering away underneath his chest, Clay can't wait to see what the rest of the day will bring.

~

"Happy birthday, George!"

A cheerful chorus erupts around the table as they clink their drinks together in the middle. The man in question sports embarrassed and flushed red cheeks, but is grinning giddily as he takes a generous gulp of his glass of fresh apple juice.

"*God*, you're so old."

Karl teases through chittered laughter, throwing his head back against the plush lining of the booth they're all currently seated in and almost knocking Sapnap's Cola out of his hand in the process. Luckily, with a protective hand, it's saved at the last second.

"We're literally the same age but pop off, I guess."

George counters flatly, accompanied by a a flying raise of his dark brows. Clay chuckles almost proudly along with him as Karl feigns a hurt look, but doesn't deny the truth.

In the darkness, under the table, he lets his leg wander to his right to press up against his soulmate's and receives a warm and glowing feeling in return that settles pleasantly in all extremities of his body. George truly loves their slap-dash group of friends, even if he won't verbally admit it all the time.

Once Clay had finally managed to convince George to venture out of his apartment and finish fiddling with and trying out all of his new things, he'd revealed to him their next plan of the day: lunch with Sapnap and Karl.

George's face had lit up beautifully at the mention of getting to see his close friends, having been restricted from meeting up properly as all four of them for about a week or so due to a mixture of school, exams and football games.

They'd filled the time in between, of course, with Discord calls and very loud games of CS:GO, Minecraft Bedwars and the like, but it's never quite as fulfilling.

The surprise had earned Clay a small and precious kiss on the cheek from his soulmate; one of those that he likes to tuck away and treasure for himself to reflect upon when George is too far away from him.

His soulmate's smile had only brightened further when he'd disclosed the location.

"That small sushi restaurant you wanted to try downtown," Clay had told him as they walked closely, side-by-side, in the correct direction towards the town centre, "You said you wanted me to try out sushi other than 'that crappy Walmart stuff', so..."

George had laughed freely at that, beaming with his white teeth glistening under the hot, Floridian sun that was just about shielded by a thin layer of clouds and a light breeze, as he approved their destination with a hearty and enthusiastic nod.

When they had arrived, Sapnap and Karl were already seated together, having secured them a booth tucked into the the corner of the woody-brown interior that's lined in the ceiling with deep-running rivers of glistening gold.

It was no surprise to find their two close friends together, whispering and giggling back and forth to each other before they spied the two of them approaching the table to join them, because they've barely been seen without each other for the past week.

When they had first entered the door to the sight of their friends sat so closely beside each other, Clay and George had only shared a knowing look and nostalgic feeling between them before continuing onwards and giving the host their names.

Clay had *had* to tell George what he had accidentally made himself privy to the night of Sapnap's party, tender words and and an even more tender kiss. Because one, George would have immediately felt that he was withholding some exciting news from him anyway through their bond, and number two, because he was absolutely bursting at the seams to have someone to jump

up and down and exclaim wildly for his best friend with.

Eventually, Clay had slipped it into conversation with Sapnap too, squeezing out more details (but not too many, thank god) from his friend and letting him buzz excitedly and animatedly about what had happened and what was currently *happening* between him and Karl.

Clay heard it all: the visiting each other's houses, Discord sleep calls and gradually more and more adventurous kisses and touches. It warmed his heart to hear because he could feel the echos of George and himself in the pauses for breath Sapnap takes between his words.

He glances (inconspicuously, he hopes) across the table to observe Karl and Sapnap as they've somehow managed to descend into light-hearted bickering concerning which type of fruit juice is the best.

Clay watches the sparkling glint that persists in Sapnap's eyes as he somehow both patiently and impatiently listens to Karl's breathless and fast-paced rant and sees so much of his love-stricken self in his friend.

His leg moves against his soulmate's again, although this time it's more instinctive than purposeful, and Clay immediately catches George's wide and attentive brown eyes that manage to pin him in place and render him breathless every time.

God, he's so glad he can just blurt the three words out now whenever he wishes, whenever they come to mind and immediately want to slip off of his tongue. It's so easy to do so with your soulmate.

And George looks so damn *good* right now, in the scarlet-red hoodie Clay had picked out and bought him for his birthday. Clay will die on the hill that red is definitely his soulmate's colour, and he especially loves when it matches the blushing shades of George's soft cheeks too.

Happily, Clay lets George order his meal for him, feeling his eagerness in doing so bumbling against their hearts.

"This is gonna blow your mind, trust me." George is telling him as he points at one thing or another that he's going to order for him off of the menu held in his slender hands.

Clay hums and agrees with him, but he's watching the small movements his soulmate makes: the trail of his finger against gold-etched, translated words, the grip of his other hand on Clay's thigh urging him to take a closer look, the softness of his pink lips as they move around the words he speaks, bright and carefree into the air.

He's going to miss this so much.

The sudden and often reoccurring realisation leaves a heavy pang in his chest. Long ago had Clay named the feeling. *Longing*.

And just how stupid is that? He finds himself thinking to himself. George hasn't even left yet and he already misses him; the comfort, the laughter, the bright and all-encompassing sun that he brings to Clay's life.

Logically, he's well aware that they're barely past the halfway line of George's visit, but with every day that dances by, they plunge inevitably further and further away from the respite Clay had found on the other side. The fight of this rational part of his mind is futile against the stormy rest.

"Clay?" His name physically jerks his brain and body back into the present. Clay finds his heart

thumping when he realises it's George who called it, "You okay?"

The searching gaze of inquisitive eyes that's cast upon him tells him that George already knows the answer to that question.

Knowing there's no point in hiding anything from his soulmate anyway, and certainly not wishing to, Clay merely uses the opportunity to flick his eyes momentarily over to Sapnap and Karl, where they're still pressed up against each other in their own little world, taking turns butchering the pronunciation of the different dishes from the menu.

George catches what he implies, *not now, later*, and gives him a reassuring curl of a tentative smile whilst also shuffling to sit closer beside him. This makes Clay grin because his soulmate knows him all too well, finding immediate comfort in his actions when he leans to wrap a steady arm around George's waist and kneads a his hand reassuringly in the flesh he finds there.

"I'll go order," Karl announces after he and Sapnap are seemingly finished making their choices, "Who's coming with?"

"I will." George volunteers, to which Clay frowns, because, as he tells him, he shouldn't have to do anything on his birthday.

Evanescent bubbles travel within him as George raises his eyebrows and poses, "Do you even know what you're ordering?" through his chuckled laughs.

"*Fineeee.*"

Clay relents through a light-hearted huff, squeezing his soulmate's side tightly once more before removing his arm from him so that George can shuffle out of the booth to join Karl.

After watching the two of them disappear around the corner, Clay soon follows the golden trails laced into the ceiling with his eyes. In his mind, they form tree branches reaching upwards towards the endless expanse of the sky; a glistening and gorgeous future.

His imagination is interrupted, however, when his green eyes dart downwards at the slightest flurry of movement; Sapnap turning back to properly face him head on.

The look on his friend's face tells him quickly that even *he* can tell that his mind is dwindling on things other than George's birthday lunch right now, soaring high above the rest of the bustling restaurant.

"What's up?"

Sapnap finally breaks and asks when Clay can't find the moisture in his mouth to speak. He's about to reply along the lines of an ambiguous 'I don't know' or 'Nothing, I'm fine', but then he sees the knowing crease of his best friend's brow and gives in with a heavy sigh.

Clay leans onto one of his elbows on the table and ruffles the other hand through the fluff of his hair, massaging his scalp as if the thoughts barraging his brain have managed to bring slight physical discomfort as well.

"I've been thinking more and more lately..." He fiddles with the loose threads at the ends of the tablecloth with his free hand, "about George having to leave eventually."

His friend's eyes are regarding his own carefully when he flicks his gaze upwards momentarily before he continues, "And I know that we've still got a couple of months left together, and that

that's such a long time in the grand scheme of things, but... I just can't shake the thought from my head lately."

It feels good, Clay quickly realises, to have finally shared this to someone, a small weight relieved from his shoulders and a sympathetic and reassuring smile from Sapnap is cast his way.

He's also sure his friend can understand all of his *soulmate* situations at a deeper level now than before; surely placing himself in Clay's shoes and Karl in George's. The thought catches in his brain and keeps him thinking; a welcome distraction, also, from the ice-cold pool of 'what ifs' that threaten to drag him down, down, down.

"What's up with you and Karl?"

Clay asks his friend with a giddy-for-them grin, also attempting, covertly, to slip the attention away from himself once again.

It works only because Sapnap is cast into a blushing fit of deep and light reds that swirl across his cheeks. Clay watches in half-wonder because even *he's* never seen his friend turn so red in the face before.

"Well, uh," Sapnap's words are breathless and expressed through a large and gleaming smile, "We're kind of together now."

Clay's eyebrows raise by themselves, "*Together*, together?"

Sapnap nods diligently as he continues.

"And you're just... waiting to see?"

"Pretty much."

A fleeting feeling drops in Clay's stomach as he rearranges his arms against the table, laying his palms flat down and leaning on his arms to incline his head slightly towards Sapnap.

"*Shit*, dude. That's so..."

He doesn't have to finish saying it because they both already know.

"Yeah," Sapnap says into the air between them, simply and softly, "But it's worth it."

There's a fond and affectionate glint in the younger's eye that Clay sees explode into thousands more as Karl's light and carefree laughter carries around the corner, melodic when it reaches their ears.

It makes Clay think of George, who must be giggling ridiculously next to him. Delicate hands brought upwards to cover his pretty, pink cheeks as his soulmate tends to do when he thinks he's laughing too hard.

It's worth it.

Sapnap's wistful words echo in his head as he replies, "Of course it is."

~

The wrap of the wind's kiss against his cheeks and the intermittent lapping of white waves provide the tranquil soundtrack to their insouciant walk along the promenade.

George's hand is wrapped warmly and protectively in his own, even though the only other living beings in sight are the gulls and the unsteady squawks they call across the bright blue sky. Clay swings their arms in between them in time with the movement of their feet against the grey concrete.

It's just the two of them, once again, having left Karl and Sapnap after finishing their laughter-ridden dinner together at the restaurant to progress onto the next part of their day.

Clay had asked George if there was anywhere in particular *he* wanted to go, seeing as it is his birthday after all, and he had been massively elated when George had suggested the beach again. The one that holds such strong and intimate memories for the both of them. '*I love you*'s etched into the sand and whispered across the sea.

They haven't spoken much since arriving, the wholeness and satiation of both of their hearts doing talking enough for their emotions.

The beach looks different during the day, under the persistent beams of the sun; the sea a gradient of teal-green to a deep lapis-blue and the sands a sheet of sparkling white laid down by the ocean to rest.

It's almost a different place entirely to the image Clay remembers; indigo skies spotted with bright stars and the mesmerising reflection that was cast in the mirror of the sea. But, either way, Clay decides, this place is a breathtakingly beautiful sight to see.

"I'm a little sad..."

George's voice attracts his attention from the broad horizon, and Clay frowns when his mind finishes interpreting the words, almost halting himself in his walk, but his soulmate cuts off the question forming on his lips when he glances over to him with a poised pout.

"I didn't get to celebrate your birthday properly this year and do all of *this* with you."

Huffing out a chuckled breath of surprise, Clay grins as George flicks his eyes downwards towards their intertwined hands and nods at them as if to demonstrate what he means.

"It's okay," Clay tells him sweetly, a part of his mind casting himself back to that very first day he had gotten the opportunity to speak to George... to his *soulmate*, "There's always next year."

But Clay is sure his eighteenth birthday, the one where he got to finally got meet his soulmate, meet *George*, will always be his favourite.

George giggles a little at the impudent grin he displays, exposing most of his teeth, causing a light, shimmering feeling to climb up the sides of his body like vines.

The rays of the afternoon sun kiss the underside of George's curved jaw as Clay allows himself moments and lifetimes to keenly watch his soulmate; the softness of his kind eyes, the instant warmth weaved within his gaze and the hidden golden flecks buried within pools of dark-brown.

Clay can't take his eyes off of him.

He breaks a little inside as he speaks.

“I’m gonna miss you so fucking much.”

It’s like an iceberg finally giving way to the inevitable and crumbling into the sea, disturbing the calm of the waves washing up against their chests. Clay feels George’s insides tighten as he glances back up at him to hold his emerald eyes.

George reaches a hand up to cup the side of Clay’s face, bringing the rhythm of their feet to a halt. Appreciatively, and very much in need of it, Clay pushes his cheek further into his soulmate’s touch, warm and vibrantly alive.

It’s George’s love and fondness that catches him, like a safety net fastened across the depths of his stomach.

Clay’s confusion finally cocks his head to the side when he watches George fight what appears to be the beginnings of a hesitant smile off of his face; holding his green eyes strong and steady.

A furrow of his brows finally causes George’s face to crack into a brilliant and illuminated grin as he leans forwards to grab onto both of Clay’s hands and hold them tightly in between them, up against their stomachs.

It does nothing but help to puzzle Clay’s mind even more, but he’s not alarmed, feeling and checking twice that the waters that stretch between them and across their bond are neither stormy nor frozen over and finding them as calm and serene as they should be.

He’s more *intrigued* as to what George could possibly be so bursting to tell him that his excitement has flooded onto his features all at once. The sight is also so impossibly endearing to Clay that his heart is dipped and dripping in another sudden wash of emotions.

“What if I told you there’s no need to?”

Clay’s breath hitches in his throat, but he doesn’t trust the slip of his lips. His grip in George’s falls lax as his brain takes all his energy to race away and his weight shifts on his feet whilst he maintains their even gaze.

George licks his lips before he speaks again, words slightly rushed and void of breath, “I’m planning on coming back, after I leave, and— and I’m gonna stay...”

His soulmate’s words linger in the cool, refreshing air. The sounds of the beach fade out around him as Clay’s heartbeat rises and pounds in his ears faster, faster and faster. He feels his lips quiver with movement but there’s no voice to clamber the feelings out of his chest.

Brown eyes trace the dips and peaks of his face, eagerly drinking in the slow parting of Clay’s dry lips and the widening of his bright eyes as he continues, “T-there’s obviously a lot of boring paperwork and stuff involved but I already worked out what I need to do and— I still have to finish my uni course for a couple of weeks after, but then—“

George doesn’t get to finish his *‘but then’* because Clay has given in completely and swooped his head downwards to capture his soulmate’s rambling, warm and supple lips into a sweet and pink-tinged kiss.

Into it, Clay channels every emotion currently pulsing through his veins: slight nerves at what George was going to say washing away, the bursting excitement expanding in his chest, filling every cracked cavity, and the surprise fringing on the edges of his heart.

Hands reaching upwards to cradle the soft skin of his soulmate's jaw, Clay barely parts for breath before he's taking George's lips into another open-mouthed and passionate kiss.

George half hums and half giggles against him throughout, and soon, Clay's mouth morphs into an unstoppable grin before he's giddily doing the same.

He can taste vanilla on George's lips, courtesy of the ice cream his soulmate had insisted they just *had* to buy when visiting the beach, and Clay can feel relief dazzling and flashing like stars within the small corners of his ribs.

George was *nervous* to tell him that he wants to stay, as if Clay would have ever had any other reaction other than wrapping his arms tightly around his soulmate and pulling him into into a crushing and all-consuming kiss.

The corners of his mouth are stretched wide and causing his cheeks to ache as he pulls back ever so slightly to rest their foreheads together, but he doesn't care. He doesn't care because George wants to *stay*.

George's face is mirroring his own, red and rosy cheeks pulled wide and pearly teeth glinting under the golden sun. Within them both, fireworks of glimmering emotions explode, coming to a head, and showering them both in a thrumming excitement of sparks for the future.

"You're going to stay?"

Clay asks him, voice low, feeling like he has to verbalise the most pressing of all the questions bouncing around his mind just to double and triple check that this isn't a dream.

His heart rockets up into the sky all over again when he sees and feels George nod against him, shaky breaths being shared in between them, never enough oxygen feeding into their lungs to sate the realisation that this would be a *forever* thing.

Not months, weeks, days. *Years* and *decades*.

A whole freaking *lifetime* that Clay gets to spend with his soulmate, with George, and the other half of his soul.

He can't help it. He has to bring his empty lips to George's again as he laughs cheerfully, afraid a silver tear might escape the corner of his eyes from the pure elation electrifying his body if he doesn't occupy himself.

"Are you sure?"

Clay would love to say that his voice doesn't break easily on the last word as he parts from George's rosebud lips once again, but that would be untrue.

Leaning himself back slightly more this time, Clay paints his soulmate's gold-shadowed face into his mind before the sun dares to dart behind a cloud.

"Well... you're here, aren't you?"

The intimacy laced between each word is so profound that even Clay feels like he shouldn't be privy to them despite being their desired recipient. He has to take a breath, lightly tracing over the delicate skin of George's cheek in the meantime, before he can respond.

"I—," His energetic tone drops ever so slightly as he asks, "What about your mum?"

Clay knows how much his soulmate's mother means to him, being George's one true source of unconditional love and comfort throughout his life for most of the years. She's the one he holds most dear and the one George has certainly missed the most whilst out in Florida, calling her every few days to update her on his studies, how decorating his room is going and every little thing in between.

Once again, he sees the golden flecks that sparkle in George's eyes as they flick upwards from watching Clay's lips and he answers, playing with the fingers on his hand that aren't currently still cupping the shorter man's face.

"We've been talking about it—" George's eyes shift away from his for a second here, as if it's something he's reluctant to admit, "—for a while... a long time. And she's always been very insistent that I should be doing things for myself, things that make me happy,"

There's a familiar and comfort-inducing pink that washes across the pale skin of George's cheeks. Clay's hand finds its way to the nape of his soulmate's neck and cards through the silky and leftover strands there.

"—and it's this... well, *you*, that makes me really happy. So, I told her I want to stay in Florida, with you, and she told me go for it."

This news brings a slow quelling to the light and airy nervousness that had brushed up against Clay's insides, feeling so light that it might inflate and escape out of his chest.

"That's—" He chokes on his words, making his soulmate giggle adorably in between, and Clay serves him a light-hearted glare that only incites his laughter more vividly, "*Shut uppppp*, George... I just— I can't believe this is happening..."

Clay is speechless.

He's been on this Earth for eighteen years and he doesn't think anyone else has ever been able to render him at a complete loss for words.

"Well, you better start believing it," His soulmate chuckles out, leaning backwards into the light touch of Clay's large hand at the back of his neck, encouraging the taller to migrate his hand upwards and properly bunch into his dark locks, "I'll be back before you even know it."

In his mind, Clay places massive doubts on that claim; any day spent without George is spent by missing the other man. All thoughts occupied by snow-white skin and red, tender lips.

But, he knows that missing George with the knowledge that he'll be on his way back to him soon, even if it's distant, will be a lot more bearable than not knowing when he'll be able to see and touch his soulmate again at all. He *knows* that.

This time, it's George that closes the distance between them, reaching up on his tippy-toes to place a kiss on his soulmate's lips, shorter in length but no less devoid of emotion than its predecessors.

"*Oh,*"

George mumbles against his lips, giggling against Clay's mouth when he's reluctant to allow him to pull away, grip firm on his neck and waist. Eventually, with encouragement from his soulmate, Clay relents, leaving George looking a little dazed before he's able to continue his reply.

"I've already been offered a job here too, through the university, as a game programmer at a company just out of town."

Clay takes a second to lean back and marvel at George in wonder before he squeezes a loving hand into his waist, “Well, that’s amazing!”

Listening with an endeared grin, Clay attempts to focus on his soulmate’s cutely rambled words of excitement for his new position, he really does, but the warmth expanding and buried deep within in his chest must give him away.

George cocks his head in question as his arms wrap around Clay’s neck securely, locking himself in place against him, leading to contentment and the warmth of *home* burning like steady embers inside both of their hearts.

Clay answers his expression with a low-toned chuckle, hearing the sparks in his chest crackle pleasantly, “My soulmate being so clever and successful is amazingly attractive, d’you know?”

George appears to have been prepared for every answer he could have possibly provided other than that one in particular, because Clay celebrates internally as he succeeds in inciting his most favourite feeling ever to the surface of George’s skin that’s blushing shades of decadent pinks and reds under his compliment.

“You’re such an idiot,”

Is all George has to tell him with a fond sigh in return before he’s pulling Clay down by his neck to meet his lips in the softest kiss, backed by the calm and glittering stretch of the sea lapping onto the sands as they slip into streams of sunlight.

Chapter End Notes

this is technically the last proper chapter of this fic!!

chapter twelve will serve more as an ‘epilogue’ where we get to see clay and george a little further on in the future and what they’ve been up to...

it’s crazy to me that this is all finally coming to a close after so long and that so many of you have been here with me along the way! i’m so amazingly grateful for each and every one of you ♥

ALSO!! quick reminder that my short karlnap fic in this series will be released sometime within the next week too- so be sure to subscribe to the series to make sure you don’t miss out on karl and sap finally getting the story they deserve <3

summer sunsets

Chapter Summary

An epilogue that follows Clay, George and their soul bond into the future.

Chapter Notes

hey everyone

what a long and wild ride it's been! but it's finally here, the last official chapter of this fic :,)

i hope you enjoy ♡

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

George has officially decided he hates moving.

All of his belongings are in boxes currently piling themselves high in the corridor, even though he's been working hard to place all of his things where they're supposed to be.

His body has become increasingly hot under his thin t-shirt, the Floridian sun truly doing its absolute best today to burn George to a crisp while he trudges back and forth between the moving truck and the front door of the apartment block in the heat.

Subsequent perspiration has settled on his brow that he quickly wipes away with a careless and, at this point, well-practiced back of his hand.

In his free hand, he carries the last and lightest box he'd just collected from the moving ruck, making sure to thank the driver for his time and patience.

The air-conditioning of the lobby is a welcome breath of fresh air against his hot skin, leading him to exude a small sigh of relief as he walks to the elevator and presses the button to call it down with a 'ding'.

When it finally arrives, George revels in the fact that he won't have to be making any more trips in this dreaded metal box today, all of his possessions finally now on the correct side of his new front door.

The lift is one of those that annoyingly has mirrors lining all the walls, so you can't avoid the dreadful state of your slightly sweat-ridden hair or the prominent crimson lacing your cheeks that you just *know* is going to get you teased...

George has decided he hates elevators by the end of his ride too.

The slide of the doors stretching open to unveil the clean whiteness of the corridor is satisfying to his ears before he steps out and walks himself to the now fairly familiar front door.

Fiddling with it in between his fingers, the key to his new home is cool, silver metal against his skin.

Just merely looking at the small object that holds such significance brings a fluttery feeling to his stomach, pleasantly sending dancing tingles along all lines of his body.

Carefully balancing the last box in the crook of his arm and against his body, he manages to insert the key and slip the door open with relatively little palaver. The lock clicks back into place behind him as he slips off his shoes and kicks them into a corner for now, not having yet quite designated a place for them to go.

He's about to release an pained and exhausted sigh after placing down the cardboard box in his hands to add to the brown towers lining the magnolia walls, but then comes the sound of light and wheezy chuckled laughter from down the hall and George can't prevent the warm grin that spreads across his cheeks.

Okay... maybe he doesn't hate moving so much if the person he's moving in with is his soulmate.

George follows the comforting noise to the kitchen, open plan and flush with the dining table and the lounge, and finds Clay chattering away down the phone to someone as he continues the job George had tasked him with of lining all the glasses up on the upper shelves (no matter what Clay says, it is most certainly *not* because he can't reach up there...).

Presumably having heard the door click shut when he made his way in, Clay's eyes are looking for him as he rounds the corner, offering him a beautiful and wide smile that George has seen so often now that he's come to deem it his 'oh my god, I can't believe I'm actually moving in with you' grin.

It's accompanied by the most overwhelming wash of sunny warmth that George thinks he's ever felt from his soulmate, even though this seems to happen more and more recently as they slowly move through the process of settling themselves in to their new home.

George had spent roughly a week living with Clay and his family after returning to Florida, following a *very* long twenty-six days for them both without physically seeing and being near to each other. Warm hugs at night supplemented with comforting words scrawled across their skin and late night Discord calls that they'd probably wake up in together in the morning, very much reminding them of the early days of their relationship.

It was hard.

Of course it was hard to leave the place he had been calling home for a number of months. But it was made so much easier by the knowledge of his return, and then very quickly later that Clay wanted to *move in* with him.

His brief week spent at Clay's parents' while all of their paperwork was being processed for their flat was... interesting, to say the least.

Both he and Clay would wake every morning from their tangle of limbs to the alluring aroma of blueberry pancakes cooked up by Clay's mum before she heads off to work. As she whizzed around the house collecting things and eventually made her way out of the door, Clay would then complain about the fact that she only ever makes breakfast for him when George is over.

George very much enjoyed joking that he was actually her favourite child, earning a empty glare from his soulmate as he eagerly devoured the delicious gold stack on his plate.

Living with Drista was certainly an experience too. Every other hour, she would tease Clay, asking why he hasn't left yet, apparently eager to make him leave the house sooner so she can turn his room into a walk-in closet or something of the sort.

However, deep down, George knows that she'll certainly miss her brother's presence everyday, although he's sure that Clay still plans to harass her and hang out with her whenever he can. His soulmate will definitely miss his sister too.

One thing Clay certainly won't be missing, however is his cat, Patches, because he had fought tooth and nail with his family to be allowed to bring her to move in with them, unwilling to be parted from her at all.

After some persuasion from George and the pleading puppy-eyes on their son's face, Clay's parents had given in, their only request that they get to come and see her every now and then, to which Clay eagerly agreed.

Patches is licking her paws happily in the centre of the kitchen, near Clay's feet, before she turns and affectionately runs her head up against his soulmate's shins with a satisfied purr. George takes a guess that she's very recently been fed with a small smile quirked down her way.

"Sure, sure. Whatever," Clay is drawling into the receiver of his phone, the roll in his eyes towards George immediately indicating who it is as he settles himself to watch, leaning against the welcome coolness of the fridge, "You and Karl can come round, like, tomorrow or something, okay?"

George can actually hear Sapnap's whined protests down the phone, despite it still being pressed against Clay's ear.

"Why not today?"

His soulmate repeats with a stretch of his free arm as he shoves a row of glasses to the back of the cabinet. George tries not to focus on the slither of tan skin that becomes exposed at the small of his back when his shirt rides up.

"We're still unpacking, there's literally nothing *to see*."

Clay's shaking his head with a hidden and secretly fond grin shining through the cracks of his cheeks.

"Okay? Cool. Yeah, see you tomorrow then, dude."

His soulmate hangs up the call with a soft sigh, turning himself around to lean against the marble counter and face George as he runs a lazy hand through the fluff of his hair.

Secretly, George is very relieved that Sapnap and Karl's undoubtedly energetic visit has been put off until tomorrow, certainly not feeling up to matching their energy as he feels his bones finally begin to relax and drop against his sides, completely exhausted and ready to be done for the day.

His other reason is currently standing across from him in the kitchen, leaning back on the palms of his hands lavishly and stretching his arms along the countertops, shifting the muscles of his shoulders to push against the tightness of his white top.

Living with your soulmate's parents doesn't provide much privacy or alone time, so George surely isn't going to waste it now that it's finally within his grasp.

Clay's green eyes are confident in watching him expectantly, as if he knows what's coming, as George swiftly closes the distance between them and takes his soulmate's firm jaw in his hands to tug his mouth down to meet his own.

Clay meets the kiss with a triumphant smirk and George simultaneously hates and loves him for it as it only adds to the pretty scarlet red painted across his cheeks.

There's summer birds singing in his heart and swooping against the bright, cerulean sky as he feels Clay's large hands close around his waist, locking him firmly against him.

George can feel his burning hot touch against his skin through the thin fabric of his light-blue t-shirt, his soulmate's fingers pleasantly singeing his waist as they move to brush against his sides.

His movement catches George slightly off-guard and has him gasping into the softness of their kiss, leading Clay to deepen it further with the introduction of his adventurous tongue.

Clay tastes like the the jelly-doughnuts they'd had after their lunch before unloading the truck and the fizzy, orange soda he'd had to follow; it's bubbly and refreshing, rejuvenating to the entirety of George's body, not only his lips that now move equally as eagerly and lusciously against his soulmate's.

George feels overwhelmed with heat again, but this time, for entirely different and much more enjoyable reasons than the relentless glares of midday baring down on him. This time, it's the sun that glows and flames from their *bond*.

It's when he's got Clay's lip trapped between his teeth and his hands finally clutched in his longish, dirty blond hair, that George feels it weave itself around their conjoined hearts and into their souls. Engulfing them in the intimacy and peace of the moment finally shared just between the two of them.

George is snapped back to the organised cogs ticking in his mind, however, when Clay moves one of his hands back against the counter to brace himself from the shorter's enthusiastic advances and the clatter of left over coffee mugs can be heard clinking against each other, still needing to be sorted away.

It's with great reluctance that George pulls himself away from his soulmate's lips and pants slowly against them, "We're never gonna get anything done like this."

The way Clay whispers his reply has all of George's hairs standing up on end and nerves shooting all the way up and down his flammable skin, "That's fine by me."

But there's something else in his soulmate's amused and lilted tone that has George arching a curious eyebrow and bracing himself slightly as he watches the emerald-green of Clay's eyes gleam under the artificial lights.

It's in one fluid motion that Clay switches their current positions, leaving George's back pressed against the drawers and cabinets and entrapping him there with his larger stature.

The flurry of the movement leaves George breathless and slightly gasping for air, which Clay is soon stealing from him again by cradling the underside of his chin and smothering his surely reddened lips into another passionate kiss.

All the emotions channeled into it, George can feel bursting into small explosions in his chest: pent-up frustration from not being able to touch George however he wants and whenever he wants when confined to his family home, desperation and enthusiasm to make up the time lost when

forced apart, and lastly, love. So much clear and pure love pouring out of his soulmate's heart and into his own.

George has never felt so protected and safe, so sheltered and completely at peace, than he does when he's held in Clay's arms. He doesn't plan to leave any time soon.

It's not until his soulmate abandons his lips in favour for the naked and blank expanse of his neck, that Clay speaks again, mumbling the words contentedly against his bitten and licked skin, leaving a masterful trail of purples and blues as he goes.

"I much prefer this, *Georgie*."

That's a name he hasn't heard fall from his soulmate's flirtatious lips for a while. The surprise has him hitching his breath at the same time Clay decides to settle his teeth into his neck again, near-sampling him like a delicacy.

Clay emits a hearty wheeze against his skin at the soft glare of empty disapproval that George shoots his way, although simultaneously clearly stretching his neck to the side in such a way that leaves his soulmate open to the option of doing it again, if he truly wishes.

"You're an idiot."

George just about manages to huff out between laboured breaths, feeling Clay's wet lips kissing their way back up his neck before eventually landing on his swollen lips again.

But George certainly doesn't complain any further when he feels the electrifying touch of Clay's fingers crawl against the skin under his shirt.

It's later in the evening and George can *finally* feel some of his moving stress evaporating from his body, leaving his shoulders lighter and relieving some of the knots that had coiled their way into the back of his neck.

They've managed to almost clear the number of cardboard boxes blocking up their corridor, finally allowing several orange beams of summer sunset to creep in and paint the wooden floor.

He and Clay had made sure to prioritise the most important items to unpack for today and leave the miscellaneous rest to do tomorrow morning.

The kitchen is fully stocked with all the plates and utensils and pots and pans that they'll undoubtedly need for dinner. George's stomach is telling him that's certainly something he should get a move on with making soon if he doesn't want to waste away where he stands.

Other important things, such as their toiletries and clothes, had been carefully filed away into their new designated places that George will undoubtedly alter about three more times in the next week alone before he finally decides he liked it the way he had it in the first place.

And of course, setting up their PCs had apparently been considered a necessity too.

Clay had tasked himself with plugging and loading everything in the other room. Whilst unpacking his own boxes through the day (after they had finished being so *distracted*), George had heard and felt his soulmate's cursed frustration when something wasn't connecting correctly or the 'stupid cable' was too short to reach the plug socket.

Secretly, George celebrates that the job hadn't fallen to him; his soulmate always super eager to please and impress him in every way possible, even to this day. Whenever he thinks of Clay's undying eagerness, it makes his heart feel incredibly warm.

Feeling his stomach protest loudly within him again, George makes his way over to the doorway to their bedroom, stepping and splashing into the pools of sunlight shimmering across the floor as he goes.

He *was* intending on asking Clay if he wanted dinner anytime soon, or if he wanted a snack or something of the sort, but George's words are stuck to the roof of his dry mouth when he goes to speak after observing the view unveiled to him by swinging open the door.

Clay mustn't have only taken the boxes containing their PC parts with him, because their bedroom has already been filled and decorated on each little surface and shelf with so much *stuff*.

On the near side of the room, George can already spot a pinboard with several printed photos already hanging on it. He can't stop the corners of his mouth from curling upwards when he sees a few are silly photos of him and Clay out on their adventures, from being doused in sunlight on the beach to that one time they'd made the most of getting caught out in the humid, Floridian rain.

A bashful blush soon rushes to accompany his grin when he glances closer and notices photos of *himself* that he's never even seen before: his side profile as he stares out to sea against a cushioned pink sunset, his blurry face caught mid-carefree laugh across a restaurant table, and the peak of his fluffy dark hair barely visible under white covers, nuzzled into the crook of a tan neck.

Mentally, he files the questions of when the hell Clay even *managed* to capture those photos away into the back of his mind in favour for letting his eyes tangle with the rest of the room.

The walls are a light and comforting pale blue, a colour which he knows Clay was so insistent on painting them because it's George's favourite. The dim evening glow, however, dips the room into a gold-plated light from the large window pane.

Several other tiny, yet momentous, features are scattered around the room. The miniature pink elephant sits on the bedside table gleaming in the sun and the small collection of pearly seashells George had taken and kept as a memento of their first date on the starry beach is displayed on a shelf.

Everything about this room reminds George of *them*. Him and Clay and their bond that runs so deep that he can feel it running in his veins. His cheeks are starting to ache with the nostalgic smile that's taken over his cheeks; George loves every single thing about this room.

Their two closets, positioned side-by-side, paint an intriguing picture of mostly blues on the left and a dullness regularly intruded by various shades of green on the right. George is sure he'll be stealing more of Clay's hoodies to add to his side again, too, however.

The small and thoughtful decorations lining their new bedroom captured his attention so intensely, apparently, that George fails to recognise the comfortable warmth and happiness blooming inside of him as not just his own.

When he finally recalls his original intention for entering the room, however, George finally meets his soulmate's gaze from where he's sitting at the far end of their room at one of their desks.

Clay is looking at him so fondly with his olive-green eyes that it makes George want to immediately avert his gaze to try and calm the washing flood of affection that suddenly engulfs his

heart, currently rather worrying for his ability to remain entirely stable on his feet.

His soulmate's face is laced with the golden sun, beautifully tan and strong-willed as always. His attentive eyes glisten as George watches his lips pull upwards into a small and hopeful smile.

"D'you like it?"

Clay gestures a with a minimal movement of his hand to the rest of the room, as if George hadn't been transfixed by it mere seconds before and standing before him, stumped with pleasant surprise.

Tilting his head a little, George can't quite believe his soulmate still feels the need to look for reassurance when the emotions that had flown through his body upon first glance were so strong and heartfelt that he had had to grip on tightly to the door frame as he had entered.

His slightly shocked smile turns soft as he finally wets his mouth to answer, "Of course I do."

From the welling lightness in his chest, George can tell that Clay is massively pleased under the praise, directing George a beaming grin in the process too, shooting brilliant sparks into the calm well of his heart.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, George is sure that he came in here with the intentions to ask Clay something or another, but the question alludes his brain now, and if staring at his soulmate's dazzlingly handsome face all day leaves him dumbfounded, George decides he's certainly fine with that.

Just when he's thinking of what it could have possibly been, leaning himself up against the white door frame, Clay emits a small noise of exclamation before he's quickly and very excitedly motioning George over to join him at his desk, maintaining his giddy, happy-go-lucky grin.

Upon reaching him, George glances over his shoulder interestedly as Clay taps away at a few keys, fingers dancing faster than his eyes care to follow.

"Ah, thank God," Clay sighs in relief as the page he was apparently searching for finally loads up, "I thought we might miss it."

Making sure to pay his full attention as he looks the screen over, shifting his own eager eyes away from tracing the sharp lines of Clay's jaw, George mirrors the excitement buzzing within his soulmate when he recognises what it is.

"You're gonna hit one million soon?!"

He exclaims happily for his soulmate as Clay nods silently, merely reaching one of his arms back to intertwine with one of George's that's currently clutched onto the back of his cushioned chair and giving it a solid and grounding squeeze as if he can't quite believe his eyes.

As the end of high school for Clay draws near, his soulmate has given a lot of thought recently as to what he'd like to be doing in the future.

Because of their similar interests and academic talents, Clay had considered jobs similar to George's (which the older loved to tease his soulmate about for 'copying him'), yet it was always rather obvious that that wasn't where his true talents lie.

Clay is a massive *people person*, gifted with the highly desirable talent to hold a room's attention with his voice alone, and a perfectionist, who enjoys having a huge say in everything he produces, like the way he's one of the main strategists for his football team.

And it's exactly because of this that his soulmate's attributes never really pointed to a corporate job working under some company and being told and directed what to do.

Clay's solution to this dilemma, however, had been YouTube.

A little after three or four months of producing Minecraft coded challenge videos on his '*Dream*' channel (with the help of George most of the time to code), his soulmate has actually amassed a considerable following and George couldn't be more proud of him.

His parents, of course, had not been so easy to sway, but after countless promises on Clay's behalf to continue to attend school and not allow his new hobby to affect his grades, they have eventually also pledged their unwavering support.

No one, not even Clay, however, had anticipated the rapidness of his growth over such a short amount of time. And he's still only on his way up, gaining thousands upon thousands of subscribers every day.

George watches his soulmate nibble at the skin on his lip from above as they both fall into a momentary silence whilst the numbers displayed on the screen slowly shift upwards, creeping closer and closer and closer.

He squeezes Clay's hand more tightly in his own because he's knows and has seen first hand the amount of effort and time he puts into each video, meticulously pouring over each and every cut and edit. He knows his soulmate deserves this more than anyone.

Out of the corner of his eye, he catches a grin reappear on the taller's cheeks amongst all of his focused concentration and immediately feels warm and helpful, despite being unable to do anything but stand beside Clay and hold his hand firmly as they watch the numbers slide by.

Adrenaline inflates both of their chests like helium balloons as the counter increases, gradually filling more and more space until the sensation suddenly pops and showers colourful streamers and confetti around their hearts, dazzling and sparkling their bond, as the number stills on a satisfying *1,000,000* before its already moving quickly past it again.

Clay emits a wheezy laugh before he's cheering goofily for himself. George soon joins in with him, eyes sparkling as he knows his words of congratulations don't need to be said as they have most certainly already been felt and appreciated.

"I still can't believe it happened so fast."

Clay is commenting as he swivels around in his tall chair to face him, still keeping their hands intertwined, but only to use them as a cunning tool to tug an unsuspecting George onto his lap and into his warm body.

He settles less gracefully than he would've liked, although that's entirely not his fault, coming to practically straddle Clay's thighs as he's forced to swing his arms quickly around his soulmate's neck so his balance can settle.

"*Clay!*"

Is all George can protest breathlessly out of his mouth, the words falling disbelievingly, yet fondly from his lips as he brings their foreheads to rest together and they both chuckle airy laughter into the small space between them.

The taller man's arms have found their home around George's slender waist, the touch of his

fingers on exposed skin from the riding up of his t-shirt electrifying all of his nerves.

“I can,” George giggles out at Clay brings his head forward to chase his lips and finds them in an excitable and messy kiss, “You’re absolutely amazing; so hard-working, wonderful and dedicated. And now everyone else can see it too, *Dream*.”

His soulmate pauses for a moment in his flurried movements, and George finds him feeling surprisingly touched before he’s scrunching up his nose cutely at the name George has taken a liking to teasing him with these days. However, he has an inkling that Clay secretly quite likes it.

I love you’s go unspoken; instead, channeled into the unbridled, stunning glow and passion of their next kiss when their lips reunite again, before it eventually slows into a soft and comfortable lavishness of wet mouths sliding idly together.

“*George*,” The shorter’s hands are bunched in his soulmate’s dark-blond locks, and one of Clay’s hands reaches up to delicately cradle his jaw as he speaks softly under his breath, “I’m gonna blow up,”

His soulmate’s fingers brush up against the pink flesh of his lips, lightly dancing over the bottom before disappearing altogether in favour of getting George to focus on the sincere and intimate gaze of his emerald eyes.

“Come with me.”

George feels a spate of yearning escape from his heart. He’s not sure who’s it is.

“*Clay*, I-“

The words splutter and stick in his mouth; George watches his soulmate’s soft and encouraging eyes thoughtfully.

Glancing over his soulmate’s inviting expression and tanned features, George can’t deny to himself that he hasn’t seriously considered the prospect before.

Clay leaves the invitation open every time for George to join him in one of his videos tackling their coded creations, although he’s never taken him up on it, happy enough with the credit his soulmate insists on providing him for helping him with the code at the beginning of each video.

He’s sure there’s a magnitude of reasons why he shouldn’t join Clay in his YouTube venture, but when he puts his mind to actually considering them properly, he can’t a single name reason that he can’t counter.

His current job is enjoyable enough and pays the bills, but as time has gone on, George has felt himself feeling more and more confined by having to follow instructions as to what he has to code and what the final product has to look like...

If he were to start his own YouTube channel and work alongside Clay, he’d have full control over what he wants to code and how he wants to do it. Hell, he’d even be working with his most favourite person in the world rather than his loud-mouthed colleagues and boss he has to pretend to find hilariously funny in the hopes of a promotion.

There’s also, of course, the question of his slightly introverted and quiet personality, but that all falls away when he’s with Clay and he’s saying stupid things on purpose to make him laugh and relax anyway...

Who's he even kidding?

He turns the arguments he can supply with an answer over and over in his mind. George doesn't think there could ever be universe in which he wouldn't agree to Clay's invitation.

He shifts himself in his soulmate's lap, still sitting on his thighs and bracketed by large and warm arms that simultaneously make him feel small and safe, and licks at his bitten and dry lips to help find words again.

Leaning back slightly in Clay's hold to allow their heads to align, George's voice is soft and quiet, yet entirely sure as he answers.

"Okay,"

In Clay's swimming green eyes he can see the dazzling reflection of the sun, the stars and the sea. His soulmate's teeth are on show as he beams up at him, grin stretching impossibly wider than before.

George runs his fingers through the back of his hair once more before his thumb moves to brush one of Clay's reddening and fondly flushed cheeks.

The most beautiful and elating sensation engulfs both of them as he finishes his response, their soul bond winding its way up and around their hearts, never to be parted again.

"I will."

Chapter End Notes

i love and appreciate you guys so, so much!

it's been insane to me the amount of support and lovely comments i've had on this fic and they definitely helped in motivating me to keep up with my update schedule every week (which i still can't quite believe i managed!!) <3

this is certainly not the last you'll see of me dnf fic wise :) i have some ideas that i'm very excited to explore, so be sure to look out!

see you all soon ♡

End Notes

i'm [@dreamingogy](#) on twitter if you want writing updates or just to say hi!

thank you so much for reading!

kudos and comments are always appreciated <3

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!